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**Re-visioning the public in the city of  
difference: Poetics and politics in post-  
reform Guangzhou, China**

By  
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**In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
School of GeoSciences  
University of Edinburgh  
July 2013**

## **Declaration of Originality**

Hereby I confirm that this thesis has been composed by me alone. I can also declare that it has not been submitted for any other degree in the University of Edinburgh or other academic institutions.

Junxi Qian

July 2013

Signature .....

Date .....

*To Guangzhou, and those who make and remake it with their own lives*

献给广州以及用自己的生活改变着她的人们

献俾广州同埋用自己嘅生活改变佢嘅人

## Abstract

This thesis attempts to contribute to the literature on urban public space. It focuses on urban China which is a non-Western social context and also undergoing unprecedented social, economic and cultural transformation since its market-reform in 1978. It suggests that the socio-spatial restructuring of post-reform Chinese cities has opened up new possibilities for examining the complex entanglement of social changes, spatial practices in the public and the reconstitution of social relations. This thesis first uses an ideal-predicament-practice framework to develop an overview of the extant literature on urban public space. It argues that in classic social theories public space is associated with two normative ideals, namely the ideal of political expression and the ideal of unfettered social engagement. However, since the 1970s most studies in Anglophone sociology, geography and urban studies have tended to focus on the decline of the public sphere. This rhetoric of decline is manifested in three major strands of research, namely the decrease of civic participation in public communication, the privatization of public space and the regulation of public space.

In this thesis, I argue that this body of literature only presents a partial picture of the ongoing construction of the public realm. While it certainly offers a solidly critical stance in the examination of urban change, it does not need to lead us to the impression that the public sphere is no longer central to our civic and political life. Many studies in this literature suffer from two epistemological problems. First, many of these studies are undergirded by a closed perspective which reifies the binary oppositions of exclusion and inclusion, absence and presence. Being visible in the public is unproblematically seen as socially empowering, while exclusion is considered to reduce the social and political relevance of public space. Second, this body of literature also delineates the public sphere in terms of fixed types of spaces which accommodate fixed uses and produce fixed social and cultural meanings. Which has been dispensed with, as a result, is an epistemologically more open approach which actively locates and analyzes people's actually existing practices and actions related to the production and construction of competing visions of publicness.

Thus I argue that the social and political potentials of public spaces are never determined prior to social members' active participation in the public realm. Public space is constantly made and remade through engaged practices which produce and construct the social and cultural turfs of space from below. Armed with this perspective, this thesis will use four

chapters of empirical research to elucidate the complex socio-spatial dynamics associated with the production and construction of public space. Four stories are narrated in this thesis:

1. The emergence of grassroots leisure class in China's urban public space and the possibilities which it has created for ordinary people to enact and perform their cultural identities.
2. Gay men's cruising in Guangzhou's People's Park and the ways in which gay men negotiate a self-disciplining subjectivity in relation to their public presence and their "deviant" and "abnormal" cultural identity.
3. The construction of improvised grassroots public and counterpublic in the singing of socialist "Red Songs" and how this collective public culture provides opportunities for the production and reproduction of political identities and political discourses.
4. The regulation of motorcycle taxis and the ways in which visions of public space are intrinsically implicated in the constitution of dominant knowledge, social relations and power structures.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## China and the question of public space

### Post-reform China and the possibilities of publicness

Where is the public realm in urban China? For most ordinary Chinese people, it is a fairly tricky question. China, after all, is a civilization without the *agora*, the *forum*, the medieval marketplace, the Renaissance urban square, and the Olmsteadian urban parks (Carr *et al.*, 1992). Numerous historical studies have argued that traditional Chinese urbanism was featured more by walls and gates than open spaces for social interactions (Knapp, 2000). Of course in recent years many “Western” landscapes have been transplanted into the physical fabrics of Chinese cities, but the notion of publicness is not yet deeply engraved in Chinese people’s imagination of everyday urban life. When I was more than ten years old my hometown, a medium-sized prefecture-level city in Eastern China, witnessed the birth of its first public square formally planned and constructed by the municipal government. Before that, streets and communal spaces in the neighbourhoods were the only spaces which were literally “public” to all the inhabitants of the city. Urban parks, on the other hand, were normally considered to be tourist attractions and charged their visitors an entrance fee. Also, as one who was born only a couple of months before the Tiananmen Square tragedy in 1989, I have not been blessed with a chance to see a mature Chinese civil society emerging in urban public spaces: the post-1989 Chinese state has been continuing to monitor closely any public gathering or public association. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, being public was a very vague notion for me. Everyday street life was usually taken for granted by the people and its social and cultural significance was less understood.

It is after I moved to Guangzhou that I began to develop a clearer understanding of what could be called “public life” in urban China. As an economically booming and culturally diverse Chinese metropolis, Guangzhou is featured by a much more sophisticated provision of physical urban spaces used for collective activities and public social life. Since the early 1990s, the Municipal Government of Guangzhou began to lift the entrance fees of urban parks, and simultaneously a number of “citizens’ squares” (*shimin guangchang*) were built to meet the demands for public leisure and sociality. Diverse forms of social life and collective activities organized by grassroots groups soon began to mushroom in these locales. The local media are keen to extol these happily organized and attended activities as manifestations of the economic prosperity and social harmony in post-reform China. For others, these activities are urban spectacles which provide some ephemeral moments of laughter and joy

when people's everyday life is quickly colonized by the logics of the market and an ever intensifying sense of social insecurity.

One of Guangzhou's most well-known sites for public social life happens to be the North Gate Square affiliated to Sun Yat-sen University where I did my bachelors study. Every evening from 7pm the square is turned into an ocean of revelries and festivities by rural migrants attending events of collective dancing, young people performing street-dance, and also middle class professionals practicing Chinese *kung fu*. In Chapter 3 I will narrate the stories of this square in more details but here I would like to do some acknowledgement work first: it is precisely this square that stimulated my interest in the social life of public space. As the North Gate Square grew into a hallmark of local community solidarity and mutual engagements, public life in it has become a topic of everyday gossips amongst the students and even the academic staffs of Sun Yat-sen University. One professor from the university's sociology department also made the famous statement: "If you want to be a good sociologist, go and do a 30-minute observation in the North Gate Square!"

If this is true, then it is the students from the university's geography department who are destined to become good sociologists, as the department is located less than 100 metres from the North Gate Square – a "proximity to life" which the sociology students can only be jealous of. In Chinese universities night time is used extensively for all types of academic activities including teaching, doing seminars, tutoring and studying. So unsurprisingly the ceaseless noises, the unexpected cheers and the loudly played music from audio devices invite many complaints amongst geography students and staffs who try to keep pace with their academic calendars. But throughout my years of studying and working in the same department, I have never heard anyone suggesting that activities in the square should be banned and the square closed. People talk about the social dramas in the square happily and come to terms with their "unluckiness" with tolerance and sometimes jokes. I assume that for all these geography professors and students, me included, the North Gate Square helps to build up our imagination of the ideal Chinese city in the quickly diversifying Chinese society. When people's social relations and social ties inherited from the Maoist China are being quickly dissolved in the post-reform era, and when the deepening social polarization has created cultural distances between differentiated social groups, spaces of associations and encounters, such as the North Gate Square, are viewed as precious and valuable, even though sometimes a bit chaotic and noisy.

The opening stories that I have told bring us to the first fundamental question that this thesis raises: why is a research of public space or public social life potentially important in the post-reform urban China? To engage with this question we need first to get familiar with

some general characteristics of post-reform Chinese urbanism. An easy and overarching characterization is to call contemporary China a transitional economy (Ma, 2002). China's crusade of Reform and Opening since 1978 has brought about the dismantling of orthodox socialist ideologies and a gradual move towards market-based economy. As the empirical studies in this thesis will show, all the practices and social dynamics which I will examine are situated in certain social, cultural and political changes in post-reform Chinese society. The contemporary Chinese urbanism is fundamentally the product of the transition from socialist political economy to post-reform economic, social and institutional arrangements (Friedmann, 2005). Several aspects of this transitional urbanism are worth highlighting here:

First, the post-reform China has experienced a rapid urban expansion as well as the construction of urban infrastructures at an immense scale. Official statistics show that in 2012 more than 50% of China's population live in urban areas, which is unprecedented in the country's history<sup>1</sup>. Statistics, of course, neglect many nuances in people's everyday life. Nonetheless, we may still postulate that more and more Chinese people nowadays are experiencing extensively the anonymity, mixing and cultural diversity of urban life documented in the classic works of Simmel ([1903]2002), Wirth ([1938]1995) and Benjamin (1999). In the meantime, the construction of urban infrastructures and the production of urban spaces serving new functions have created more microscopic urban locales situated in the public realm. By the phrase "public realm" I am not referring to *de jure* public properties. In the Maoist era most Chinese urban people lived in state enterprise housing compounds which were nominally all public properties. But the *economic right* (Webster, 2003) to the spaces and resources in these cell-like residential blocks was restricted to the employees of particular state enterprises. In contrast, the public realm which I envisage is a social territory in which people of different ages, sexes, genders, social statuses and professions can freely mingle with each other, and perform the cultural diversities of the city. Such micro-level urban public realms are now mushrooming in many Chinese cities.

Second, the post-reform Chinese society is characterized by the intensifying social differentiation and the diversification of social identities. The social structure composed of relatively homogenous socialist people has collapsed and on the ruins of it we are witnessing the emergence of numerous well defined social groups. Sociologist Yanjie Bian and colleagues have already observed remarkable social stratification in post-reform China (Bian, 2002; Bian and Logan, 1996). The trajectories of life for those who have economically and socially benefited from the market transition have radically departed from those of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Urban development in China Report No.5*, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Source: online article: Xinhua News Agency, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2012-08/14/c\\_112722956.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2012-08/14/c_112722956.htm)

victims of the new economic regime. In contemporary China social polarization is intense and social mobility is low, which is in many aspects similar to the post-welfare and neoliberal societies in the West. In the meantime, a huge amount of rural migrants have flowed into major urban centres for opportunities of low-paid and low-skilled employments. These rural migrants feed into China's integration into the global economy with cheap labour. But thanks to China's apartheid-like *hukou* system they are excluded from any urban-based social welfare and social services. Suffering from the double oppression of economic exploitation and cultural stigmatization, rural migrants are probably the most marginalized social group in the post-reform urban China (Zhang, 2001; Solinger, 1999). Furthermore, some other cultural identities which were previously subsumed under the overarching umbrella of socialist culture are also beginning to surface in the post-reform era, such as the gay identity which I will examine in Chapter 4.

Finally, the post-modern urban China is in a continuous negotiation with the rise of the Chinese modernity. Old social and cultural relations fell against the backdrop of commodification and economic liberalization. New meanings, relations and institutions are enacted as the constituent elements of new social and political power. The booming economy, the increased wealth of the people, and the circulation of knowledge and discourses at a global scale have given rise to new conceptions of norms and social orders. I remember that when I was a child wagons drawn by donkeys and mules were still seen from time to time in the streets of my hometown. But less than twenty years later even motorcycles are now prohibited in almost 200 Chinese cities, including Guangzhou. Before I was six I lived in an urban neighbourhood with living conditions similar to those of the subaltern slums in India and South America. But nowadays many Chinese urban inhabitants would be reluctant to portray Chinese cities as "Third World urbanism" any longer. In Chapter 6 I will tell the story of the outlawing of motorcycle mobility in Guangzhou, but the point I would like to make here is that urban China nowadays is a quicksand of fast flowing and shifting cultural meanings and social relations. How do people negotiate this highly fluid terrain of modernity? What new power relations have produced, and been produced by, the Chinese modernity? These questions are essential to any discussion of the social and cultural transformation in post-reform China.

Then how do people in post-reform Chinese cities perform new or old cultural identities, come to terms with new *zeitgeists* and social norms, and establish new social relations in a highly volatile social environment? It appears to me that the newly emerged urban public social life, the contestation over public space, and the public realm as a whole can be productive points of entry for such an analysis. This thesis, therefore, attempts to work on



this project. It examines the complex social, cultural and political geographies which constitute the publicness in post-reform urban China and investigate how these intersecting time-spaces work to delineate social relations, shape social power, and produce cultural identities.

In the Western theories, public spaces are associated with two normative ideals. First, public space is seen as the arena in which ideas are expressed and communicated. This ideal dates back to the Greek *agora* and Roman *forum*, and in this thesis I call it the *political* ideal of public space. Second, public space is also regarded as a shared social space in which interpersonal contacts and negotiation of difference can be realized. This vision of public space can be seen in the medieval marketplaces and city piazzas, but it has been most extensively elaborated by modern theorists such as Jane Jacobs, Iris Young and Richard Sennett. In this thesis, I call it the *civic* ideal of public space. Throughout this thesis my analyses will follow these two ideas and my focus is thus placed on the relationships between everyday social life and the social and political significance of public space. However, charting different courses alongside these two ideals entail different research questions. On the one hand, one might ask: have these ideals of public space been actually fulfilled? In the Anglophone scholarship this question has led to a lot of frustration and disappointment. A lot of studies have lamented the decline, the “end” or the “death” of public space in the modern and postmodern West (Sennett, 1977; Sorkin, 1992a): social members’ increased obsession with private life and the intensifying privatization and control of public space have prompted many scholars to adopt a pessimistic view towards the fate of public space in contemporary Western societies.

As I will discuss in Chapter 2, such an approach towards public space is bound to be unproductive for my analyses of public spaces in China. It presumes a public sphere whose boundary is delineated prior to actual actions and practices, and neglects many alternative time-spaces which potentially contribute to everyday public life. It also reifies an either-or relationship between inclusion and exclusion, good public space and bad public space, while foreclosing other possibilities of relations, interactions and practices. In a civilization where the political and civic ideals associated with public space are not as strong as in the West, a convenient conclusion might be that there is simply no mature public sphere in urban China. The tightened control of public spaces for political address in China after the Tiananmen Square tragedy in 1989 seems to make this conclusion even more convincing. But this conclusion cannot explain the North Gate Square and the noises from it which I have hated and cherished for many years. It cannot explain the daily coexistence of rural migrants and middle-class professionals in this shared social terrain. Neither can it explain the gossips,

excitement, joy and dismay which the social life in the square has aroused amongst students and staffs of Sun Yat-sen University. Thus in my thesis I adopt a different research question: I ask *where* and *to what extent* the political and social significance of public space is achieved through the practices of everyday life, and *how* the ideals of public space are negotiated in everyday practices, rather than *whether or not* these ideals are realized. Avoiding the narrative of either-or enables me to adopt an approach which actively locates and examines people's actual actions and practices related to the production and construction of public spaces. No value judgement of a particular space will be made in advance to a close scrutiny of the complex spatial practices, social relations and cultural meanings which continuously create the possibilities, but also draw the limits, of urban encounters and enchantment (Watson, 2006).

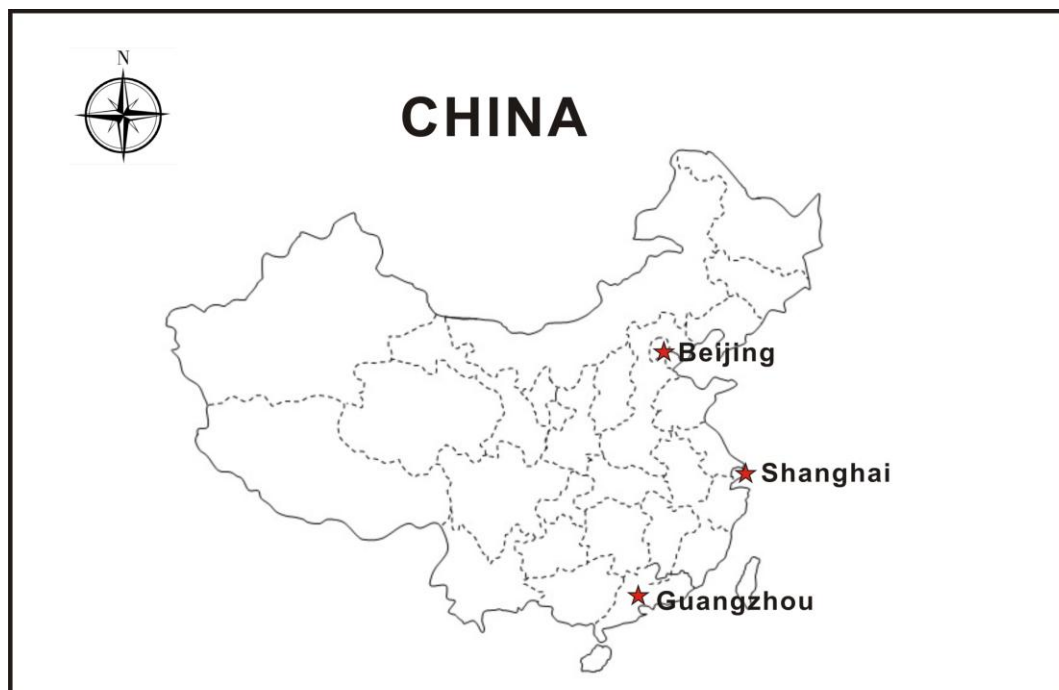
Thus rather than quantitatively and qualitatively measuring the values and qualities of a public sphere as such, this thesis rejects the notion of a pre-established public sphere and instead views it as improvised, decentred and fragmented. It approaches the time-spaces of public social life from below and actively locate those urban locales which are intrinsically implicated in social and cultural formations. There are two focuses in the analyses throughout this thesis. First, this thesis spotlights urban inhabitants' and social actors' actual practices and actions in the production and construction of public spaces. These actions and practices include the mundane everyday life in which social members use and appropriate public spaces, but also the ways in which they represent, envision and reconstitute the public. This thesis is interested in the variety of meanings and discourses emerging from spatial practices. It also examines how these actions and practices shape and are shaped by the social interactions and social relations between various actors or social groups. Second, this thesis looks in particular at the processes of identity formation in the production of public space. Much of the analysis in this thesis will be dedicated to the ways in which identities rise and fall, surface and subside in social members' production of and negotiation with the public realm. Identities are played out and performed through social life in the public space. But sometimes they can also be concealed, stigmatized and regulated. Social members act and engage with others according to their particular social and cultural positions. In the meantime, identities establish the orders and norms of public space, and delineate the boundaries and limits of actions and practices. Identities are also implicated in the relations of social power which produce and reproduce spatialities of the public.

### **The place of study: Guangzhou, China**

Guangzhou, or Canton, is the third largest metropolitan city in Mainland China, next only to Shanghai and Beijing. It is the capital city of Guangdong Province and possesses the central location of the Pearl River Delta – one of China's (and the world's) most important manufacturing industrial centres and economic engines. According to the 2010 national census, Guangzhou houses a population of more than 12 million, one third of which are migrants who do not hold a local *hukou* status. Guangzhou is a vanguard in China's crusade of Reform and Opening since 1978. Due to its proximity to Hong Kong, both geographically and culturally, and its long-standing tradition of international trade, the post-reform Guangzhou soon began to experience unprecedented economic boom. It is also at the very frontier of China's integration into the global economy. Intense foreign investments – previously from Hong Kong and Taiwan and now also from Japan, North America and Europe – have brought vitality to both manufacturing industries and financial sectors. Nowadays Guangzhou is a major financial centre in Southern China with two Central Business Districts (CBDs), though outshone by the neighbouring global city Hong Kong. It is also empowered by a strong base of heavy industries and prosperous tertiary sectors. The urban built environment in Guangzhou has expanded drastically to uphold its economic development. The old city centre has undergone major renewals and gentrifications. New land development has also profoundly extended the parameter of the city. Around 20 years ago, Sun Yat-sen University was surrounded by agricultural land, but now it is located in the midst of luxurious residential towers. The construction of urban public spaces, we may surmise, is also intended to add to the attractiveness of this fast expanding built environment. On the other hand, Guangzhou is also characterized by an immense number of rural-to-urban migrants. Most of the migrants are employed in small-sized manufacturing enterprises and informal service sectors. In many aspects Guangzhou resembles those economically and socially highly divided global metropolises portrayed in Sassen's (2001) work, with one of the highest per capital GDPs in Mainland China and at the same time stunning migrant poverty and marginality.

My rationale for choosing Guangzhou as the geographical focus of my research is threefold. First and most importantly, it is a major city in China which I am very familiar with. I have been exploring the city since my earlier training in urban and regional planning, and I have also done a number of studies on it of which the topics have covered the marketing of global city image (Zhu, Qian and Gao, 2011); the changing place identities and place politics (Zhu, Qian and Feng, 2011; Qian, Zhu and Liu, 2011; Qian, Qian and Zhu, 2012a; 2012b); and more recently urban gentrification (He *et al.*, 2012; He, Qian and Deng, 2011; He, Qian and Wu, 2011). Second, as an economically booming metropolis Guangzhou

is a city constantly produced and reproduced by a surprising cultural diversity: a vibrant local culture still lives well; and rural migrant slums are juxtaposed with enclaves of African traders and gated neighbourhoods inhabited by Japanese and South Korean high-skilled expatriates. Thus Guangzhou is very often described as the most “chaotic” city in China. But the chaotic nature of Guangzhou's social and cultural fabrics opened up the vision of a radical mosaic crosscut by a multiplicity of social and cultural processes. Third, due to its distance from the political centre in Beijing and the cultural influence from the neighbouring Hong Kong, Guangzhou is featured by a relatively liberal-minded local state and a stronger civil society. Thus in normal cases the local state only exerts loose control of public spaces. Public gatherings with oppositional political projects are certainly closely monitored and suppressed. But other than these circumstances social members are generally free to participate in public social life. During my fieldwork in Guangzhou I am often surprised at the low degree of state intervention into everyday public spaces. This is not to say that institutionalized zoning which explicitly excludes certain social groups from the access to public space is nonexistent. In Chapter 6 I will focus precisely on the social cleansing and regulation of public streets and how this governmental agenda produces unequal right to the city. But in the same time I am still inclined to acknowledge that the public realm in Guangzhou is more vibrant than suffocated and saturated with rich possibilities of practices, performances and social interactions.



**Figure 1-1 The location of Guangzhou in China**

## Deciphering the title of this thesis

In this section I will briefly explain the title of this thesis in order to give an overview of the basic concepts which guide my choices of cases studies as well as the ways in which I narrate them:

*Public*: In this thesis, I use the term “public” mainly to refer to material urban spaces as well as the social sphere which these spaces constitute, rather than the discursive spaces which the Habermasian theories have focused on. Public space can be conceptualized in various ways. As Madanipour (2003, pp. 98-99) puts it, “a space can be considered public if it is controlled by the public authorities, concerns the people as a whole, is open or available to them, and is used or shared by all the members of a community”. But to understand the public space in terms of public ownership and legally granted accessibility may also be misleading. As Nicholas Blomley (2004) has noted, property right or ownership itself is an unsettled notion. Ownership is not simply defined on the basis of legal entitlement. In many cases, a sense of property right is accumulated due to social members’ long-term *inhabitation* of space.

Thus this thesis follows Habermas’s (1989) and Sennett’s (1977) approaches towards the public sphere and investigates the production of public space from the perspective of actions and practices. It argues that instead of legal definitions and entitlements it is the inter-personal exchanges of ideas and meanings, the negotiation of social relations, and the production of collective cultures that have given rise to a sense of publicness. But in contrast to Habermas and Sennett, this thesis does not view the public as a well defined social sphere demarcated by clear boundaries of actions. It also rejects the notion that the vitality and healthiness of public social life can be measured quantitatively. Thus this thesis is not interested in identifying the start or end of public space and also avoids making conclusions about whether the public sphere has been *increased* or *declined*. On the contrary, the public in this thesis is viewed as decentred and dispersed. It is an amorphous social realm which is implicated in actually existing actions, practices and relations. In other words, the existence of the public is not external to social life itself. It is in a constant process of creation, destruction and re-creation. Social members always possess the agency to produce and appropriate micro-publics according to their needs and interests. It is brought into being whenever and wherever non-intimate and interpersonal engagements and social relations are placed at the centre of our everyday life.

*City of difference:* Difference is one of the defining features of contemporary urban life. As Jacobs and Fincher (1998) have argued, difference refers to the ways in which social members' subject position is constituted by a wide range of discursive practices that label, name and ascribe. In the meantime, difference is also situated in the material conditions of everyday life. Moreover, all these social processes of empowerment, oppression and exclusion may work through the regimes of difference (p. 2). Although difference is socially and discursively constructed, it sometimes manifests itself in the form of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 1995) in order to support collective cultural or political projects. In empirical studies, difference is often analyzed in terms of social identities and categories, such as women, middle class, blacks, gays, young people, etc. But as Pratt (1998) once argued, our difference is not simply bounded in well defined social categories. It constantly crosses defined boundaries and there is a wide range of possibilities to formulate the ideas of who we are. In other words, we live in intersecting grids of differences. Therefore this thesis adopts a Deleuzian conception of difference and concurs that difference does not simply derive from pre-established categories and identities. On the contrary, it is difference which creates the possibilities of collective cultural identifications (Deleuze, 1994). There are no two things completely the same and identities are composed of endless series of differences. It is not to say that this thesis will drill so deep as to explore the processes of subject formations at a purely individual level. Its argument, rather, is that there are diverse ways for us to configure social identities and form social collectives. For example, in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 I will investigate the performances of identities in everyday spatial practices. Some of those identities, such as red song singers, arts enthusiasts, floating teachers and *kung fu* practitioners, are not conventional social categories which are naturally ready for sociological analyses. These identities cross the boundaries of class, sex, gender, profession, etc., and their meanings and cultural connotations are often highly unstable. Nonetheless, these largely improvised and performative identity positions navigate people's ways of acting and thinking, shape the relations and interactions between various social actors, and produce the structures of social power.

*Poetics and politics:* The production and construction of any public space is an entanglement of poetics and politics. While poetics refers to ordinary people's multi-sensuous experiences of spatial practices and the meanings and emotional feelings these experiences give rise to, politics is the process in which competing positions and meanings come into conflict and contestation. In this thesis, I investigate the poetics of public space with regard to three aspects. First, this thesis pays attention to the ways in which ordinary people use and

appropriate public space, and how everyday spatial practices accommodate their specific needs and interests. Many of these needs and interests are also situated in the recent social and cultural transformation of post-reform China. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, for example, the spatial practices that ordinary people stage in the public are related to the commodification of cultural institution, the loosening of state regulation of sexual minorities, the ascendancy of capitalist logics in urban China, *etc.* Second, the poetics of public spaces concerns the performative dimension of everyday social life. It suggests that social and cultural identities are not simply carried into urban spaces. Rather, they are actively re-negotiated and reproduced through corporeal practices, discursive contours and social engagements. Finally, analyses of the poetics of public space also take into account the cultural meanings and emotional dwellings that spatial practices can give rise to as well as how these meanings and emotions in turn reconstitute identities and social relations.

The politics of public space, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which social relations and power are structured through uses of and struggles over public spaces. In this thesis I will mainly focus on the constitution of the social norms, moral standards and ideological meanings associated with public space. It examines how the production of normative regimes contributes to the establishment of cultural boundaries and sometimes even straightforward exclusions. These normative regimes are enacted through the visions of appropriate uses of and desirable behaviours in public spaces. They also render public space a constituent element, rather than simply the physical setting, of everyday politics and contestation. Meanwhile, this thesis will also pay attention to how social members act back upon normative ideologies and meanings, sometimes with conformity (as in Chapter 4) and sometimes with discursive contestation (as in Chapter 6). All these actions, without doubt, reconstruct social relations and reshape the distribution of social power.

## **Introducing the structure of this thesis**

This thesis contains five substantive chapters followed by a Conclusion chapter. An appendix on the methods and fieldwork experiences will also be provided at the end of this thesis. In Chapter 2 I will present the theoretical outline of this thesis. I use an ideal-predicament-practice framework to develop an overview of the studies of public space in human geography, sociology and urban studies. I start this chapter by foregrounding the political and civic ideals associated with public space. Following these two ideals enables this thesis to focus on the uses, actions and social dynamics that public space accommodates as well as their implications for civic and political life. In the meantime, Chapter 2 also

suggests that there are different ways to situate the ideals of public spaces into concrete practices and actions. On the one hand, in the recent studies of public space in the Western – particularly Anglophone scholarship – the public sphere is frequently portrayed to be hijacked by capital interests and regulatory regimes. The decline of participation in the public sphere, the privatization of public space and the regulation of public space are three most important empirical observations which support the rhetoric of decline. What often lurks underneath this strand of studies is the impression that public space is no longer central to our everyday social life and interpersonal engagements. Chapter 2 suggests that this body of literature only presents a partial representation of contemporary public space. It also questions the narrative of decline on the basis of two arguments. First, it suggests that this literature presumes the binary oppositions of inclusion and exclusion, presence and absence, while neglecting the ways in which inclusion and exclusion penetrate into the construction of each other. Thus it argues that both inclusion and exclusion are assemblages of practices and actions, and both are central to the ongoing reproduction and re-construction of the public realm. Second, Chapter 2 contends that the same literature demonstrates epistemological fixities in the imagination of the public realm. In contrast, it advocates an alternative and epistemologically less bounded approach which actively locates actually existing practices, encounters and engagements.

The theoretical and conceptual set-up presented in Chapter 2 will be upheld by four empirical-analytical chapters. Chapter 3 will present a detailed ethnography of everyday leisure and cultural activities in Guangzhou's People's Park and the North Gate Square which I have already mentioned. It will analyze how nonessential and fluid cultural identities are performed in mundane social life and how these performances shape and are shaped by social relations and the encounters with others. In general, the People's Park and the North Gate Square are analyzed as socially progressive spaces which are open to diverse social and cultural practices. But the social and cultural significance of these spaces does not simply arise from ordinary people's presence or visibility in the public. The public man examined in this chapter resembles in many aspects the figure extolled by Sennett (1977) – a reflective social agent which gives genuine expressions and act in response to the presence of others. Because of the inherent diversity of social relations and cultural meanings that constitute our public life, inclusion rarely lives up to the absolute sense. The People's Park and the North Gate Square provide rich possibilities for progressive social engagements and respect between social groups. But in the meantime this progressiveness may also be compromised by cultural barriers and prejudices which are also the products of practices and social interactions.



To further understand the complexity of social life examined in Chapter 3 and foreground the mutually constitutive nature of inclusion and exclusion, Chapter 4 investigates gay men's cruising in People's Park and how they steer a course between their presence in the park and the hetero-normative ideologies encoded in public spaces which potentially exclude their presence. The argument which guides the empirical analyses in this chapter is that being included or present in the public is not automatically translatable to progressive potentials and empowerment. It also attempts to foreground the ways in which inclusion and exclusion intersect each other in the constitution of public geographies. Empirical observations in this chapter suggest that to reconcile their "deviant presence" in the public, gay cruisers in People's Park privilege self-discipline over more transgressive modes of social interactions. Gay men's practice of self-regulation certainly manifests the stigmatization of homosexuality in the Chinese society as a whole, but it also speaks to the fact that every public space is ideologically coded and social members' inclusion into the public does not necessarily eradicate normative regimes that regulate the expression of identities. For the gay cruisers examined in this chapter, the *exclusion* of certain expressions of gayness is to sustain their *inclusion* in the public and protect the survivability of a shared territory.

In Chapter 5 the focus of my analyses shifts to the political expression and the making of politicized public space. In the Western literature, a number of commentators have lamented the decline of the political public sphere and social members' withdrawal from spontaneous political communication and expression. Although this observation is certainly grounded in empirical realities, it also underestimates social members' agency to enact diverse time-spaces of political association and communication. Thus Chapter 5 proposes a different approach to conceptualize the notion of public. It rejects the vision of the public as a clearly demarcated, universal social sphere. Instead, it focuses on the construction of the public in terms of the practices and actions *from below* which render the public concrete and meaningful. Social life is constituted of multiple *publics*, and social groups produce their own spatialities of public expression and communication by using and appropriating public locations. Armed with this broad theoretical stance, Chapter 5 analyzes the collective singing of socialist "red songs" in Guangzhou's urban parks. These sites of collective singing are fairly unremarkable, but spatial practices in these sites facilitate the sharing of political meanings and the formation of communal solidarity. It also has the potential to cultivate new counterpublic actions, as seen from the presence of New-Leftist activists in the events of singing. During the singing of red songs, political identities are not static or pre-given. Instead, they are mediated by spatial practices and the ideological contours carried in the red songs.

Chapter 6, the last empirical chapter, examines the regulation of public space by studying the outlawing of motorcycle taxis in Guangzhou and how it is related to the reproduction of the right to the city. Seeking a different course from the rhetoric of the end of public space, Chapter 6 implies that regulation and control do not simply annihilate public space and render it socially irrelevant. As several commentators have already argued (see Mitchell, 1995; 2003a; Watson, 2006; Paddison and Sharp, 2007; Madden, 2010), public space is always about contestation and conflict, and it is very often struggles that place public space at the very centre of social life and political negotiation. Chapter 6 echoes this argument by showing that space is always implicated in the ongoing construction of social power. In Guangzhou, it is through the visions and representations of space that governmental rationales are constituted and regulatory practices are justified. Similar to the gay cruising examined in Chapter 4, in the regulation of motorcycle taxis exclusion and inclusion are imbricated in the construction of each other. In hegemonic state narratives, the exclusion of “unruly” and “chaotic” motorcycle mobility is expected to contribute to the inclusion of more civilized and modern mobile practices. As Madden (2010) has argued, the regulation of public space should not be understood as the “end” of its publicness, but rather a process in which competing conceptions of *publicness* itself come into conflict and in which new logics of publicity are assembled and inscribed into everyday landscapes.

Chapter 7 concludes this thesis by proposing a relational imagination of public spaces. Drawing from poststructural conceptions of space, Chapter 7 envisions public space not as a pre-defined social realm with fixed uses, fixed modes of interactions or fixed cultural meanings, but as an ongoing dynamic which keeps producing new social and cultural potentials. Drawing on the Deleuzian notion of assemblage which will also be engaged with in Chapter 2, Chapter 7 argues that there is no pre-given blueprint which determines the essential nature of space. Even though privatization and regulation deprive certain spaces of their social and cultural significance during specific historical periods, they are by no means the only time-spaces which are able to contribute to the production and construction of the public realm. Also, exclusion itself is an intricate process in which space is reproduced and reconstructed. Thus it is important to examine how exclusion works as a constitutive element of the configuration of spatiality. Furthermore, throughout this thesis I make attempts to put into question the binary oppositions and epistemological fixities which haunt the current literature on public space. In doing so, this thesis foregrounds the inherent complexities of public social life and the endless possibilities of practices, engagements and social relations which public space keeps in store. Chapter 7 will also revisit Chapters 2-6.

## Chapter 2 Public space: ideals, predicaments, practices

### Public space: political and civic ideals

#### Public space as political forum

In classic social theories, the concept of public space traces back to the Greek *agora* and the Roman *forum*. Ever since its birth, public space has acted as a central social and political arena in which free expressions of ideas and opinions are allowed and encouraged. In the *agoras* and *forums*, the citizens of Athens and Rome exchanged their opinions on the public matters of the city, making public space the primary locus of reason and rationality. According to Hartley (1992, pp. 29-30), the Greek agora is “a place of citizenship, an open space where public affairs and legal disputes were conducted”, and “where words, actions, and produce were all literally on mutual display, and where judgments, bargains and decisions were made”.

In the context of industrial modernity, Marshall Berman (1983) views the modern city as a key precondition for the emergence of a more inclusive urban public. In his seminal discussion on the Haussmannian Paris, Berman attributes the increased sociality and encounters between urban citizens to the construction of the *boulevards* which accorded new everyday routines and symbolic meanings to urban life. During that time, city spaces became more accessible to all the urban inhabitants and inter-class social interactions within a shared civic space also became possible. As a result, Berman was proud to proclaim, “Now after centuries of life as a cluster of isolated cells, Paris was becoming a unified physical and human space” (p. 151).

For Berman, the most important change brought about by the emergence of shared social spaces was that the increased visibility of previously isolated and hidden urban social groups, especially the urban poor who were now pushed to the forestage of the urban scenes along with the opening-up of the physical structure of the city. As ordinary citizens saw the others in open spaces, they were also continuously seen. As Berman puts it:

Haussmann, in tearing down the old medieval slums, inadvertently broke down the self-closed and hermetically sealed world of traditional poverty. (*ibid*, p. 153)

The increased visibility of class difference in the city streets enabled modern subjects to see the complexity of urban realities through mutual exposure. Now, the lovers’ walking along the boulevards was not only a romantic encounter with the urban built environment, but interrupted from time to time by the presence of various social groups around. This urban

scene thus turned into an arena of subtle politics – the politics of visibility and new social sensitivities. It echoes Richard Sennett's (1971; 1977) argument that the politics of the public is to some extent about feeling the emotions, desires, intentions as well as the pains of other people.

But the politics of the public extends much beyond the domain of visibility. It is at the same time deeply situated in the configuration and transformation of modern public sphere. The idea(l) of public sphere is attributed mainly to the canonical writings of Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas. An important aspect of their theorization is to link the collective power of public association to the broader formation of democratic political relations (also de Tocqueville, 1969). To Arendt (1958; 1973), the public space is the sphere of action which is essential to democratic citizenship. It is a realm where citizens are free to participate in the collective deliberation for a common project (Goodsell, 2003; Hansen, 1993; D'Entreves, 1994). In Arendt's political philosophy, the necessary dichotomy of public and private spheres results from the different functions of *expressive* action and *communicative* action (Benhabib, 1996). While expressive action allows for the self-actualization of the person, communicative expression is oriented to reaching reciprocal understandings between social subjects. For Arendt, who also views expressive action as the *agonal* action, the realization of inter-subjective political understandings requires a public sphere in which expressive actions can *appear* to and ideas be shared with others. The concept of expressive action is also related to Arendt's phenomenological construction of the idea of "the space for appearance". A space where people can gather together and appear to each other is key to the formation of a public; and as she famously argues, action without a name, a 'who' attached to it, is meaningless.

The public space of appearance can be recreated anew whenever actors gather together politically for the purpose of discussing on matters of public concern; and it disappears the moment these activities cease. The possibility of acting in concert for a common project incubates the *power* of the public sphere. Power is a product of action because it arises out of the concerted activities of a plurality of agents and it rests on the moment of persuasion because it is purposed to secure the consent of others through unfettered discussion and rational debate:

Power, then, lies at the basis of every political community and is the expression of a potential that is always available to actors. It is also the source of vitality and legitimacy of political and governmental institutions, the means whereby they are transformed and adapted to new circumstances and made to respond to the opinions and needs of the citizens. (D'Entreves, 1993, p. 79)

While Arendt's conceptualization of the public sphere rests mainly on a radical politics of appearing to others and gathering together, Habermas' development of the idea of public sphere focuses on a rational negotiation between the state and the civil society. Different from Arendt who emphasizes the importance of physical spaces which can act as the venues of gathering and expression, Habermas insists on the importance of discursive spaces built upon popular media such as newspapers (Habermas, 1974; Benhabib, 1996). For Habermas, the rise of the public sphere is fundamentally a modern phenomenon. It represents the modern bourgeoisie class's collective action based on shared interests in order to contest the state authority. The modern public sphere emerged in the late-seventeenth century, and found its seedbeds in the coffee houses of London and the salons of Paris. In Habermas' (1989) milestone book *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, the public sphere is a political intermediary between the state and the bourgeois civil society, and its reciprocal nature is based on rational-critical debates. The rise of the bourgeois public sphere is a process in which middle class individuals form political collectives which gave rise to public opinions based on shared interests and shared projects. Reason, which is the codification of rational principles, is the key to the discursive mutuality in the functioning of public sphere (Calhoun, 1992; Laurier and Philo, 2007): political negotiations are undertaken in accordance with rational deliberation, and consensus is expected to benefit all political parties (Habermas, 1974). Habermas suggests that the bourgeoisie "became an effective interest group possessing the communication skills and manipulating the levers of power, thereby exercising power over the institutions of government" (Goheen, 1998, p. 481). Similar to Arendt, Habermas also insists on the ideal that the access to public sphere should be guaranteed to all citizens, even though this promise has never been fully delivered<sup>2</sup> (Habermas, 1974). As Habermas (1974) defines the concept of public sphere:

Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the free to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest (p. 49).

Benhabib (1996, p. 202) names Arendt's public sphere a radical-democratic public sphere, while Habermas's the liberal-representative public sphere. However, there are notable theoretical convergences between the two most important conceptualizations of public

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<sup>2</sup> Habermas' standpoint that the public sphere is accessible to all citizens is open to suspicion, since in *The structural transformation of public sphere*, the public sphere refers exclusively to a political body of the bourgeois urban class, while Habermas himself criticized the dissolution of the boundaries of public sphere to include other social groups (see Habermas, 1989; 1974). For the critiques of Habermas' exclusive conceptualization of the public sphere, see Goheen (1998) and Fraser (1990) for a review.

sphere. Both Arendt and Habermas emphasize the accessibility of the public sphere to all citizens and the important of private individuals gathering together to form public opinions through either physical spaces or discursive spaces.

The definition of the public sphere as the venue for political address resonates amongst more recent scholarly discussions on the socio-political realm which is named the “public”. Notably, contemporary studies of the public sphere follow more frequently the Arendtian approach which is friendlier to a theory of plurality and diverse social identities than the Habermasian approach oriented towards bourgeoisie universalism. According to the Arendtian tradition, public space is the social and political setting in which collectivity recognizes itself and claims its interests and politics through a shared interpretive repertoire as well as the arena where the citizens engage in a public politics and “give reasons in public, to entertain others’ point of view, to transform the dictates of self-interest into a common public goal” (Benhabib, 2000, p. 168). Lynn Staeheli (2010, p. 70) defines the public in terms of “that group of people recognized as being legitimate participants in political discussion, deliberation, and governing” and the public sphere as “the *forum* for discussion and public address”. Deutsche (1996), in recognizing the masculine domination of conventional public discursive spaces, points out that the public space should be regarded as inherently empty of substantive content in that its only source of legitimacy is liberated discourses itself.

In the meantime, the enactment of the public sphere for free address is always associated with the political meanings that space and place can bear. The emergence of the public sphere does not only have a history, but also a geography (Low and Smith, 2006). The Speakers’ Corner is the spirit of free speech concretized in its spatialized form. A lot of studies in geography have paid attention to the role that physical public spaces can play in staging collective claims against hegemonic regimes of power. Public demonstrations, protest and other forms of claim-making (Mitchell, 2000; McCann, 1999; Lee, 2009; Salmenkari, 2009) disrupt and shift relations of power by occupying and re-working important public space and by presenting particular groups’ political claims to a wide audience (D’Arcus, 2003; 2006; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2005). If free speech is seen as a defining element of the modern liberal democracy, it is very often in material public spaces that we can envisage it being actually realized (Iveson, 2007; Mitchell, 2003a).

### **Public space as civic humanism**

Another normative ideal associated with public space spotlights its role in facilitating social interactions and contributing to the civic healthiness of city life. Theories in urban sociology

and urban design have long been contending that public space is constructed and produced through bodily encounters and social interactions with strangers and differences. As Orum and Neal (2010) have argued, social life in public space is essential to the civic order of the city.

In the classic writings of Simmel ([1903]2002) and Wirth ([1938]1995), the city was portrayed as the place with such a diversity of people that our established personality was constantly challenged and destabilized. While Simmel's thesis on city life claims that the unbearable diversity of the city eventually motivates people to avoid interpersonal contacts and retreat into the private sphere, Benjamin (1999) brings to our attention the sensational feelings and enjoyment that the phantasmagoria of urban life can engender. As Amin and Graham (2005) have argued, cities act as the centres of agglomeration and proximity. An ideal city is thus a meeting place designated for unfettered social contacts and interactions. Public urban spaces need to act as the shared social terrain on which strangers and multiple cultural identities mix and "rub shoulders" with each other (Jacobs, 1961; Watson, 2006).

In the first place, the civic order that public space breeds refers to the unfettered social interactions and encounters between strangers sharing and appropriating the same public landscape (Madanipour, 2003). This vision of public space is associated with many great urban scholars such as Jane Jacobs, William Whyte, Ray Oldenburg, Jan Gehl, *etc.* For Jacobs (1961), urban public space should not be colonized by logics of capital accumulation and rational urban planning. In her depiction of social life in shared community spaces, active use of space and mutual interactions are viewed not only as the key to the ceaseless and spontaneous monitoring of street security, but also a *mélange* of mutual care, friendliness and tolerance. William Whyte (1980) and Ray Oldenburg (1989) also applauded the central role that public places can play in alleviating the psychological tensions between urban strangers and promoting civic healthiness of the city. Oldenburg (1989), for example, names those often unremarkable, unspectacular public spaces as the "third place" of the city – informal social spaces outside the ordinary routines of work and home – and argues that these spaces are designated for "regular, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings" which are salubrious to community order and capable of accommodating playful, convivial collective life outside the conventions of everyday life (also Carr *et al.*, 1992). Such an image of public space is often conceived of as an integral dimension of the *civic humanism* of urban social life (Blomley, 2011).

On the other hand, urban public space as the physical setting of unfettered social interactions and encounters between strangers also plays the central role in our negotiation of differences and diversities in the city. The city, as Jacobs and Fincher (1998) suggest, is the

arena where social and cultural differences are gathered, negotiated and reproduced with a surprising intensity. Through the mutual contact and engagement between ideas and identities, social relations are constantly reasserted or subverted. Richard Sennett (1971; 1977; 1992) views as an integral element of humanity the ability to reflectively explore the self through one's exposure to otherness. For Sennett (1977), the public man is conceived of as one who is capable to orient his/her ways of thinking and acting for responding to the presence of strangers. In the public realm, social relations are constantly configured, destabilized and reconstructed. But people need to develop the ability to translate potential tensions emerging out of encounter and diversity into the ethical moments of coexistence and respect (Sennett, 2004). Such ability cannot be developed with the intimacies of the private sphere and must be actively *learned* through mutual engagements in public social life. If public social life gives way to the confinement of the private and the intimate, the rich possibilities for interpersonal relations will also be lost (Watson, 2006; Sennett, 1977; 1992).

As Watson (2006) argues, public space allows individuals to inscribe their values, claims and identities into a physical space through a dynamic of seeing and being seen, feeling and being felt. The construction of public space is highly embodied, and can be achieved only through grounded practices and active engagement with both space and people. A vibrant, diverse and meaningful public life is about tacit human responses to a situated multiplicity which arises from a state of thrown-togetherness (Massey, 2005; Amin, 2008) which is constituted of coexisting bodies, relations, representations and meanings.

Difference and diversity in public social life can only be negotiated via individuals' or social groups' opportunities to represent themselves in the spaces and places of the city (Watson, 1999). Social interactions across the lines of difference help to create the possibility of a democratic citizenship (Young, 1990). Thus Walzer (1995) appeals for what he calls *open-minded* public space which is not built upon exclusive visions of homogeneity and order. In the ideal city, as Iris Young's (1990) now canonical portrait of progressive urban life insightfully summarizes, strangers should be given the opportunities to mediate interpersonal or inter-group relations through intersecting networks of unconstrained associations and democratic negotiations:

By "city life" I mean a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers. In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions and dissolving into unity or commonness... City dwellers frequently venture beyond such familiar enclaves, however, to the more open public of politics, commerce, and festival, where strangers meet and interact (cf. Lofland, 1973). City dwelling situates one's own identity and activity in relation to a horizon of a vast variety of activity affects the conditions of one's own. (pp. 237-238)



Young's discussion of urban life connects public social life to both a politics of difference and the question of democratic citizenship. As this chapter will show later, in recent studies many scholars' lament over the "loss", "end", or even "death" of public space very often speaks to the annihilation of difference and diversity in public social life. Indeed, the politics of visibility and the possibility of negotiation across the lines of difference lie at the centre of the question about whether a public space can be employed for socially and politically progressive purposes. Only through daily practices or politics in public realm can one expose to others his/her social and cultural identities: to occupy a physical public space is also to inhabit a cultural space of meanings and constructed difference (Watson, 1999). Thereby physical space is transformed into a social territory fraught with discourses, intentions and desires (Karrholm, 2007). In order to express and play out our identities (either in a vocal or bodily manner), we need to find an audience; and this audience is to be found in the public (Iveson, 2007). As Mitchell (2005) argues:

The nature of public space is in part defines the nature of citizenship. It shapes modes of engagement, the visibility of alternative politics, and the possibility for unscripted (that is involuntary) interactions. It provides a space of engagement within which the public comes to recognize themselves. (p. 85)

## **The end of public space?**

### **The decline of collective social life**

Ideals, of course, can rarely live up to the full actualization. In fact, since the 1980s a significant part of the literature in public space studies can be simply named the "end-of-public-space" literature (Sorkin, 1992a). A widely shared viewpoint in this body of literature suggests that in the modern and postmodern Western cities it is increasingly difficult for public space to fulfil its role as the heart of democratic civic life. In this chapter I will identify three major strands of arguments which support, or at least echo, the thesis of the end of public space – the decline of collective social life, the intensifying privatization of the public realm, and the increasingly stringent regulation of public space.

In the first place, a number of social and urban theorists have contended that in the modern West, there has been a major decline of ordinary citizens' participation in the public sphere and collective social life. In the second part of his thesis on the public sphere, Habermas (1989) argues that the rise of the mass society of the welfare state has fundamentally sabotaged the previously clear demarcation between the state and the civil society. In a welfare mass society, state power is involved directly in the care for social members' private interests, which

transforms the relationship between the state and the society from one of rational negotiation to one of structural dependency. On the other hand, the rise of mass media and consumer culture also eroded the traditional discursive spaces in the service of the communicative public sphere. Habermas's argument echoes with Frankfurt School's classic viewpoint that in a mass society of consumerist culture, social members are reduced to passive consumers of prefabricated, mass circulated cultural meanings and symbols (Adorno, 1991). Public media are colonized by trivial texts, images and symbols instead of being inhabited by rational political debates. In the meantime, the civil society is also compartmentalized into political parties which compete for particularistic agendas while largely ignoring the principle of universalism which is one of the cornerstones of bourgeoisie public sphere.

In *The fall of public man*, Richard Sennett (1977) approaches the decline of the public sphere from a different perspective. For Sennett, public life before the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a stage-like arena saturated with rich interpersonal relations and meanings. Encounters with strangers in public settings motivated social members to adopt various positions and present the self in a performative manner. The public man, as Sennett proposes, was an actor-like figure who constructed complex emotional ties with others and gave genuine expressions for orienting the exchanges of meanings. In this way, social members learned the ways to respond to and negotiate with the intentions, emotions and personalities of others. As Sennett (1977) describes the man as actor:

[U]nder a system of expression as the presentation of emotion, the man in public has an identity as an actor – an enactor, if you like – and this identity involves him and others in a social bond. Expression as a presentation of emotion is the actor's job – if for the moment we take that word in a very broad sense; his identity is based on making expression as presentation work. (p. 108)

For Sennett, this vibrant public sphere of mutual expression went into a decline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when people were increasingly obsessed with more intimate social relations in an enclosed private sphere. Streets and public spaces were deprived of the rich possibilities of meaning-making, and strangers in the public became taken-for-granted manifestations of disorder as well as sources of fear (Sennett, 1971; 1992). Nowadays people are much more inclined to indulging themselves in exclusive and individualistic pleasures disconnected from civic responsibilities. On the other hand, in a comparable vein to Debord's (1994) critique of the society of the spectacle, Sennett (1977) contends that the emergence of the *flâneur* way of urban life privileged seeing over other sensuous engagements, which reduced active public actors into passive spectators. In an analysis of Rousseau's *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*, Margaret Kohn (2008) also argues against the disturbing nature of passivity in modern social life. For Kohn, the fantasy of romantic togetherness and inert juxtaposition of diverse elements often marks the fundamental absence of any real interactions facilitating mutual identification amongst

social members.

As Christine Boyer (1996) argues, in contemporary cities the public is often considered to be negative, while the private life is both emotionally comforting and morally superior. The obsession with private life poses threats to both communal solidarity and the civic order of the city. Robert Putnam (2000), for example, warns that in the United States community-based political agency is being jeopardized due to the dissolution of traditional social associations. In another work, Putnam (1993) advocates that strong civic engagement is essential to both the good performance of governments and the formation of democratic political relations.

More recently, Don Mitchell and others have called for attention to a different crisis associated with the participatory possibilities of public sphere. In a series of works, Mitchell (1996; 2003a; 2003b) has examined the public forum doctrine institutionalized in the US legal regime and how this legal principle works to delineate the boundary between public spaces in which public address is allowed and the rest of the public realm where free speech is considered to be inappropriate and infringing to private property interests. With the focus of social control shifting from what is said to *where* it is said, Mitchell (2003b) argues that the legal regime collaborates with the increasingly stringent monitoring and regulation of public speech and protest. In other cases, specific zones of protest are demarcated such that public speech would not conflict with other interests, especially those of the state authority and business development (Benton-Short, 2007; Herbert, 2007). I will come back to this issue later in my review of the regulation of public space, but here I would like to juxtapose the curtailment of free speech and the discussions from the abovementioned social theorists on the decline of public participation to present a more holistic picture of the shrinking of the ideal public sphere.

### **The privatization of public space**

The second issue related to the thesis of the end of public space concerns the privatized use of (nominally) public urban spaces. Two types of spaces, namely the shopping mall and the gated community, will be the foci of my discussion here. The shopping mall is perhaps the principle example of the growing private spaces which have recently replaced the bustling street life of cities. First emerging in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the shopping mall played a significant role in shaping the suburban lifestyle of the American middle class. Designed primarily as a private space which accommodates urban citizens' demands for commodity consumption, the shopping mall allows the white, middle-class shoppers to realize a consumerist identity without unwanted encounters and potential conflicts with members from other social strata and races. The most important characteristics of a shopping mall is that it creates a pleasurable and comfortable shopping environment, while in the same time turning the shoppers into passive viewers without any experiences of the bargaining,

vocal communication and idea exchange in a traditional street or market (Sorkin, 1992a; 1992b; Crawford, 1992; Kohn, 2004; Jackson, 1998; Banerjee, 2001). Often blending fantasy-like interior landscaping to simulate the vibrant cultural atmospheres of traditional towns and plazas, the shopping mall is nonetheless considered by many authors a unitary and pale world dominated by the culture of consumption (Hopkins, 1990). As Goss (1993, p. 22) observes, the design of the shopping mall often shows “a modernist nostalgia for authentic community, perceived to exist only in past and distant places, and have promoted the conceit of the shopping mall centre as an alternative focus for modern community life” (also Goss, 1999).

Public life in the shopping mall, however, is highly restricted. In fact, one of the most important reasons for which the shopping mall is so enthusiastically embraced by the white, middle class urbanites is that it provides a safe, privatized and highly controlled space free from disturbing encounters with the poor, the homeless, the black and the working class – in other words, the shopping mall is a secured and purified space without the painful interactions with the unwanted (McLaughlin and Muncie, 1999). As Kohn (2004) points out, the shopping mall is attractive because it combines an imaginary cultural atmosphere of old time public life *and* a sense of intimacy and safety which only private spaces can provide. Fantasy, fear and safety are interwoven elements in the cultural construction of the postmodern shopping space (Van Melik *et al.*, 2007). The wrong elements from the outside world are totally locked out so as not to divert shoppers from their identity as consumers (Mattson, 1999). In most cases, the privatized space of the shopping mall is not allowed for expressive acts such as panhandling, leafleting or public addressing (Kohn, 2004; Mattson, 1999). Transgressive behaviours are also tightly regulated, and minority social groups who are considered not in accordance with the logics of social order and profit-making, such as the beggars, the young people, the homeless, etc, are intentionally excluded (Goss, 1993; Kohn, 2004).

The shopping mall has also evolved into other forms of urban spaces<sup>3</sup>. Its most famous cousins, arguably, are the Disney theme parks which reduce the complex social realities into a fantasy of nowhere (Sorkin, 1992a; Banerjee, 2001). For Sorkin (1992a), the Disneyland is an extreme case of treating the city as the spectacle for passive viewing and visual

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<sup>3</sup> The mutated forms of the shopping mall are limited to the cases I will describe, of course. For example, the rising popularity of waterfront development also speaks to the postmodern nostalgia for the past and for the elsewhere. As Goss (1996, p. 223) critiques in his remarks on waterfront development: the city is “constructed as an object of bourgeois desire, in which is realized the dream of social solidarity among a community of strangers in an authentic public realm; of social interaction and transaction in a free market(place), of imaginative and spontaneous “acting out” of individual and cultural identity in the practices of street theatre and festival; and of social liminality on the waterfront where past and present, nature and civilization, and self and Other meet” (see also Boyer, 1993).

consumption. Similar philosophies of constructing utopias of consumerist culture can be also found in the development of historical shopping centres, enclosed pedestrian bridges and underground walking tunnels (Boddy, 1992; Goss, 1996; Boyer, 1992). More recently, cities in the United States have also witnessed the booming of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). Designed to reverse the desperate economic decline of many North American downtowns, a stereotypical BID usually combines the functions of consumption, employment, tourism and residence. These new enclaves of middle class consumption are usually managerially closed by private governing bodies which provide packaged services of sanitation, security and landscaping (Kohn, 2004). Unsurprisingly, control of the access to and the uses of these spaces is also strict (Briffault, 1999; Low, 2006a).

Another widely critiqued case of the privatization of urban space is the construction of gated communities. Enclosed, walled, and sometimes fortified, the gated communities are viewed as the middle class' new enclaves of privilege (Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Davis, 1990; 1992; Low, 2006a, 2006b; Caldeira, 1996). Mike Davis (1992) argues that the fortified gated communities emerged from the white middle class' hysteria-like fear for crime and disorder which were believed to be brought about by the poor and the ethnic minorities. As a result, residential communities must be fortified to achieve a greater internal homogeneity and more importantly to keep the unwanted away. As Kohn (2004) argues, the gated community is a space that allows no voice from the counter-publics. The marketing of gated communities, in the meantime, is based on the selling of fantasies: the gated community provides the opportunity to imagine social life thoroughly free of the irreversible social antagonisms, and makes it possible to avoid unbearable encounters with the strangers.

Similar processes to the gating of residential communities have happened during the uproars of gentrification and urban redevelopment. For Neil Smith (1992; 1996), such processes are the spatial expressions of the neoliberal state revenging the working class, the urban poor, the homeless people and other "undesirable" social groups. Employing the discourses of fear and disorder, urban neoliberal development evicts the subordinated social groups through the powerful mechanisms of criminalization and stigmatization. When the downtown neighbourhoods become the new frontiers of capital accumulation, the parks, the streets and the plazas which have sheltered the livelihood of subordinate social groups are now quickly subjected to the hegemonic ideology of capitalist consumption and increasingly subject to strict state regulation.

The privatization of urban public space is situated in a broader context of neoliberalization and a global wave of city image-making. With a transition to neoliberal and entrepreneurial models of urban governance, the public goods distribution approach of public space

provision is increasingly replaced by an economic competitiveness approach (Mandeli, 2010). The underlying logic is that production of (allegedly) public space must fit with the privileged initiatives of capital accumulation and commodity consumption. Shopping malls, gated communities and BIDs are all vivid manifestation of this new social-spatial dialectic (Soja, 1980). On the other hand, the privatization of urban spaces is also a passive response to the intensifying social conflicts around the axes of class, ethnicity and race. Through the privatization of urban space, capital has taken advantage of the geographies of insecurity and fear to launch unprecedented crusades of spatially unjust urban redevelopment: social tensions are managed and contained through the relocation of, rather than the care for, marginal social groups.

Fortification of urban space has its detrimental effects. For example, Low (2006a) points out that the development of gated communities and biased zoning laws can jointly lead to public funds spent on service facilities whose use is nonetheless limited to a small group of citizens. It is a process in which public goods are transformed into semi-public or even private goods (Mattson, 1999). Besides, the working of Homeowner Associations under the banner of Common Interest Housing (CIH) often results in private government regimes which contribute to the fragmentation of public government (McKenzie, 1994; Low, 2006b). But the most negative of all those effects is perhaps that the philosophy underlying the creation of gated communities and other exclusive urban spaces turns the “city of connection” into “city of disconnection” (Amin and Graham, 2005) where mutual encounters between citizens from different social groups and the negotiations across lines of difference are rendered impossible. As Sennett (1971) suggests, the construction of the barriers for interactions is a process in which some groups build up social and mental “walls” around themselves to achieve the exclusion of others who are “not the same”. The consequence is that difference is firmly rejected in favour of sameness. As Allen (2005) has commented, the gatedness of urban life is in a disturbing contrast to what an ideal city is supposed to be:

At one level, the idea of spatial separation explicit in this form of purity can be understood as a reaction to the extraordinary mix of city life, that is, as an inability to deal with the ‘strangeness’ of others. (p. 81)

For many commentators, the prevalence of privatized spaces such as the shopping malls, the pedestrian bridges, Disneyland, and the historical shopping centres is turning the modern citizens from active participants in public affairs into passive viewers in an alienating world of commodity: the city life becomes a spectacle to be consumed via a *flâneur* lifestyle, rather than the stimulant to a mature political sensibility (Sennett, 1977). Kohn (2008) argues that

when a state of inertia and an obsession with spectatorship become the essence of social life, the progressive political potential of urban social life will be fundamentally impaired. As has been discussed earlier, the importance of public life and public space lies in the fact that it represents the views, values and identities of diverse social groups (Kohn, 2004). The expressions of identities and claims are not always vocal, but often depend on the bodily encounters between strangers in the public (Watson, 2006). The privatization of urban space, on the contrary, hinders these encounters as it confines social members within separated social worlds.

### **Regulation, surveillance and control of public space**

The last strand of research focuses on the increasingly stringent control of urban public spaces. Practices of regulation and control are based on established social norms concerning who and what kinds of behaviours can be accepted in public spaces. In this line of research, the urban society in the present time is less a world of free encounters and exchanges than a world of CCTV cameras and security patrols (Crang, 1996; Mclaughlin and Munice, 1999; Fyfe and Bannister, 1996; 1998). As Iveson (2010a) points out, the cutting-edge technologies of our time are increasingly being applied in the surveillance and regulation of disorder and deviancy, making the city more or less similar to a battlefield (Graham, 2010). In these studies, it is through defining differentiated access to public spaces that the hegemonic visions of normativity, social order and civility are enacted. Those who are considered to be the uncivilized and disorderly others are discursively distinguished from the more “respectable” parts of the society and excluded from the use of public space (Flusty, 2001; Atkinson, 2003; Bannister *et al.*, 2006).

As I have touched upon earlier, the first social group which is likely to be excluded from the streets, the parks and other urban public spaces is constituted by political activists and dissenters who challenge hegemonic political orders and thus often confront the relentless oppression from the dominant social group. One common weapon used by the dominant group is to banish the activists from the public space and thus make them invisible. The urban public space has thus become a new terrain of urban management in order to subsume the expression of public opinions under an overarching framework of social order (Mitchell and Staeheli, 2005). As Mitchell and Staeheli (2005) has noted, a new spatial politics of public dissent management has recently emerged in the United States, featured by the new regulatory mechanisms of “protest-zoning” (Herbert, 2007). Public demonstrations and assemblies now must be permitted by the police prior to taking place in physical spaces. In this way, public address is carefully regulated by the state in conformity to the principles of

right “time, place and manner” – the liberal principle of free speech has now submitted itself to a new regulatory regime demarcating the “boundaries of dissent” (D’Arcus, 2006). The policing and regulation of public demonstrations during major political events such as the APEC Summit and IMF/World Bank Summit, for example, has given rise to new tensions between the liberal democratic creed of free speech and actually existing state power (e.g. Epstein and Iveson, 2007; Martin, 2011). In the meantime, the state’s passion for regulating public protest has expanded into other domains of public governance as law makers legitimize the bubble laws to restrict the access of expressive acts, for example panhandling and leafleting, to the targeted audience (Mitchell, 2003b; 2005). This new model of social interaction, which is called by Mitchell (2005) the “S.U.V model of citizenship”, is the consequence of a long-standing fear of, and hostility towards, publicly expressed miseries, needs, attitudes and identities. The emphasis on rational and orderly public speech has in fact turned public space from an arena of free expression to one of “managed speech” (Mitchell, 2003b).

Other social groups who are often likely to become the victims of the control of public space include the homeless (Kohn, 2004; Mitchell, 2003a; Daly, 1999; Berti, 2010; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2010), the street panhandlers (Collins and Blomley, 2003) and other marginalized social groups who are believed to be both threatening and uncivilized (Lees, 1998). The exclusion of these social groups who are claimed to be socially disturbing is enmeshed in the powerful discourses of crimes, fear and public insecurity<sup>4</sup>. In many contemporary cities, a whole set of security infrastructures is being established for the monitoring of those “threatening elements” (Németh, 2010; Németh and Holland, 2010). In this process the law, as the normativized discursive space which delineates the boundaries between the right and the wrong, plays a central role in criminalizing “deviant” social groups. Laws and rules act as legal representations used against those who are supposed to have crossed the widely accepted spatial boundaries and social norms (Berti, 2010).

The widely critiqued “broken window theory” (Wilson and Kelling, 1982; Kelling and Coles, 1998) and Robert Ellickson’s (1996) notorious proposition to establish homeless-free zones in the city to reduce the threats posed by deviant homeless people are just two examples of this socio-mental ecology of fear. As Kohn (2004) comments on the hostile attitude recently surging in North American cities towards homeless people, much of this

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<sup>4</sup> Exclusive politics of public space is often justified with the discourse of fear and safety. The 9/11 attack in New York has pushed this ecology of fear onto its summit (see Benton-Short, 2007). To exclude marginalized social groups from using public spaces, dominant discourses intentionally stigmatize the poor, the homeless, etc. into rude and uncivil criminals who are responsible for the rising insecurity of urban life. The regulation of public space is thus a situation in which, as Ellin (1996) calls, form follows fear (see also Hannigan, 1998; England and Simon, 2010).



aversion is attributed to the fact that homeless people have to do in the public many activities of social reproduction which are commonly believed to be essentially private (sleeping, eating, washing, having sex, urinating, defecating, etc.). However, what the predominant policy orientations have frequently ignored is that everything that is done has to be done *somewhere*. Since the homeless people occupy no private space, they have to perform their body functions in the public – the public space is the only place which they can access for the fulfilment of their humanity (Waldron, 1991)<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, to deny the homeless people's right to the city is also to deny their citizenship and their existence as a whole.

It is now a standard academic discourse that the toughening of public space regulation can be associated with the intensifying competition between cities for attracting footloose capital in a global age (Harvey, 1989a). In advanced capitalist societies, urban redevelopment agendas nowadays are largely oriented towards creating a safe and pleasant environment for achieving the spatial fix of fluid capital (Mitchell, 2003a). This entrepreneurial philosophy of urban governance regards public security as a key element in the attractiveness of the urban environment which is expected to eventually reverse the decline in the economic profitability of the urban spaces (Bannister *et al.*, 2006). The new regulatory regime, as Mitchell (2003a) argues, is closely related to the rise of this neoliberal political economy – a political economy which must be understood in relation to the “annihilation of space by time” in the post-Fordist global economy (Harvey, 1989b).

However, the exclusion of public space through the annihilation of difference is not always concerned with the tension between the (neo)liberal state and assumedly dangerous sections of the society. It is invoked also in moments when identities of different social groups collide and contest with each other. To understand these conflicts is to acknowledge that social life in the city is always about meeting and rubbing shoulder with strangers with different social positions and cultural orientations. Negotiating difference with others provides the opportunities to transcend the social categories and cultural positionalities in which we are initially placed (Sennett, 1992). But in reality the situation is often less optimistic than the romantic ideal which Sennett advocates. Rather than actively engage ourselves in the encounters with difference, we often prefer a politics of disengagement: we surrender to the forces that create a disjunction between the inner self and external social life and withdraw into isolated worlds of uncontaminated selves (Sennett, 1992; Watson, 2006). Encountering difference in public space is interpreted as a disturbing experience, and to

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<sup>5</sup> The revanchist regulation of the homeless people reached a peak as several cities in the US decided that even giving food to the homeless people for free or at a low price is not acceptable – in other words, the intervention from the civil society in alleviating the suffering of the homeless people is also subject to criminalization; see Mitchell and Heynen (2009).

reduce the social and cultural diversity in the public, dominant norms and codes are often enacted to define who and what behaviours are acceptable in particular spaces. Those who do not fit with these norms and codes are from time to time regulated and excluded.

A politics of difference is always entangled with the structures of social power. In most cases it is the socially and politically more powerful who possess the privileged position to deify their own rules and moral standards as naturalized and absolute norms. Exclusions as the results of the pursuit of homogeneity are around all the axes of race, nationalities, cultural traditions, sexual orientation, gender and other forms of cultural identities. Groups and cultural practices victimized by the exclusive politics of public space also include young people (Collins and Kearns, 2001; Jeffs and Smith, 1996; Lucas, 1998; Wieszkalnys, 2007; 2008); youth culture, in particular parkouring, skating and skateboarding (Ameel and Tani, 2012; Malone, 2002; Nolan, 2003; Carr, 2010; Vivoni, 2009; Chiu, 2009); women (Bondi, 1998; Fraser, 1990; Duncan, 1996); sexual minorities, sex workers and sexual expressions (Hubbard, 2001; 2004; Papayanis, 2000; Kirby and Hay, 1997; Iveson, 2007; Bell *et al.*, 1994); people in the informal sector of economy, in particular street vendors (Donovan, 2008; Hunt, 2009; Crossa, 2009); drug dealers and users (England, 2008) and even children (Valentine, 1996; 1997; Young, 2003). Certainly, the exclusion of marginal cultural identities is very often intertwined with the ambition of constructing urban attractiveness for corporate interests and capital accumulation. But in the meantime, the exclusion of “unacceptable” or “unwelcome” elements from public space is reflective of the widespread mental rejection of, and moral panic over, the non-mainstream others and the particular behaviours associated with them – a mentality which is now fundamentally reshaping our social life and ways of social interactions. Justified in the name of collective interests of the society and the aesthetics of dominant moralities, the purity of space is achieved through defining certain elements of the society as “out-of-place” (Cresswell, 1996) and relocating them to the more marginal spaces of the society (Sibley, 1988).

## **Practising public space: a theoretical intervention**

### **Public space as practice, dynamic and assemblage**

Surely, all these studies discussed in the previous section are both empirically convincing and analytically solid in themselves. Also, these studies opened up important lenses through which we could assess and evaluate contemporary public life with a solidly critical stance and attentiveness to the issues of democratic citizenship and social justice. However, these studies only present a partial picture of the complex social, cultural and spatial dynamics

associated with public space. What are the socialities and spatialities which the body of literature has concealed? Does it run the risk of foreclosing the possibilities for us to envisage, situate and represent alternative stories and trajectories? In other words, if we adopt a positivist and bounded epistemology towards interpreting findings in these studies, it may also lead us to inaccurate portraits of the contested nature of public space. It also runs the risk of conveying the impression that nowadays public space is deprived of its rich social, cultural and political meanings and thus no longer essential to our social life. In this section of the chapter, however, I would like to propose a different perspective to characterize the unsettled social, cultural and political dynamics of public space and also voice unequivocally that the political and social potentials of public space have never been fundamentally compromised, despite the ascendance of neoliberal capitalism and the construction of exclusive urban spaces.

Indeed, it seems to me that a shared point of view underlying many of these studies reviewed above is that the old ways of political engagement and social interaction in public space are being rapidly displaced. Of course, unlike earlier writers such as Sennett (1977) and Sorkin (1989a) most authors in public space research now avoid making explicit references to the vocabulary of end or death, as it cannot capture the complexities of our concrete everyday experiences of urban spaces. Many works are cited above simply because they are related to the issues of decline, privatization and regulation. However, my overview of the literature discussed above also suggests that instead of a coherent and explicitly stated argument, the “end of public space” is often a rhetorical contour which from time to time orients our depictions and understandings of the historical trajectories of the public sphere. What can be glimpsed underneath the three strands of studies reviewed above is often a lament over the “decline” of public space: a dichotomy of past/present is subtly performed in the discursive configurations of many of these studies.

More recently, key authors in public space research such as Crawford (1995), Deutsche (1996), Mitchell (2003), Watson (2006) and Iveson (2007) have already made important theoretical interventions into the narrative of the end of public space. Without doubt, the normative ideals associated with public spaces are always the ethical infrastructure undergirding the struggles and fights for citizenship and the right to space. But these ideals need not to be understood in terms of a rigid dichotomy between an imagined vibrant public sphere located in another time and space, and a declining one which features nothing but enclosure and withdrawal. Indeed, the pessimistic accounts of Habermas (1989), Sennett (1977) and Sorkin (1992a) are often critiqued on the basis that these arguments conjure up the imagination of a romantic past in which public life was based on the universal principles

of rational debates and social inclusion while more or less immune to the complex negotiations of difference and dynamics of social power.

The literature reviewed in the above section also urges us to look more closely at two important analytical problems. First, many studies in this literature are undergirded by the binary oppositions of inclusion and exclusion, presence and absence. It is assumed that being included or present in the public can be unproblematically translated to progressive potentials. On the other hand, it is also assumed that exclusion reduces the social and political relevance of public spaces. Many other time-spaces which do not fit seamlessly with these binary oppositions are hence ignored and less explored. Inclusion and exclusion are analyzed as two separate, mutually exclusive domains. One important issue which has failed to be taken into account is the way in which inclusion and exclusion penetrate into the construction of each other. Also, repression and regulation are thought to be imposed *upon* spatial relations, rather than constituted *through* the configuration of spatialities. Dominant regimes of social power are analyzed as monolithic and top-down, which forecloses the possibilities of deconstructing hegemonic discourses, representations and rationales in order to create resistant potentials.

As a result, many studies in line with this perspective tend to focus exclusively on the spatial openness or enclosure of particular public spaces, while largely neglecting the complex internal dynamics which disrupt the imagined coherence of spatial practices in the public. The presence and visibility of bodies in spaces alone are thought to be sufficient for the enactment of democratic citizenship (Mitchell, 2003a). It is assumed that “being seen” in the public can automatically breed democratic social life, and what is sidestepped is the closer scrutiny of the actual social, cultural and discursive practices delineating the complex contours and boundaries of identities and differences (see Iveson, 2007 for an insightful critique of this visibility-equals-empowerment narrative). However, the social and political significance of public space which is founded upon this paradigm seems to be intrinsically vulnerable. It is often assumed that any social or cultural dynamics destabilizing the pre-programmed routines of visibility, participation and social interaction would lead to the assumed authenticity of public space being sabotaged and render public space less relevant to our everyday social life. What is neglected, however, is the constitutive role which space plays in the production of social relations as well as the analytical importance of space in our attempts to deconstruct hegemonic social power.

Second, many studies in this literature also reproduce the rhetoric of the decline of public space by presuming a fixed set of urban spaces which accommodate some fixed uses and thus produce fixed social, cultural and political meanings. This fixity can be glimpsed in

particular from Habermas's (1989) and Sennett's (1989) arguments that people are nowadays less and less inclined to participate in public life, which is supposed to lead to an *inevitable* decline of the public sphere. In their portraits of social and political life, only some fixed modes of social interactions taking place in fixed types of spaces can facilitate political associations and social connections. These two theorists, among others, were thus reluctant to expand the scope of their analyses beyond the spaces which they had focused on, and they also failed to take into account *other* modes of social interactions which might equally contribute to interpersonal relations and political associations.

In this way, the public sphere is imagined in terms of a limited number of spaces and limited modes of social interactions. Such a perspective only allows us to examine spaces which are identified and defined in advance, but not to actively *locate* spaces in which practices actually take place. Thus for many theorists, the political ideal of the public sphere seems to reside only in the rational debates located in widely shared physical or discursive spaces as well as those overtly confrontational public protests in landmark urban places (e.g. Mitchell, 1996; 2003b). With regard to the civic ideal of the public sphere, on the other hand, social theorists such as Sennett (1977; 1992) often assume an irresolvable tension or a win-lose relationship between the organic and authentic *theatrum mundi* of the city and other modes of interactions in public space. Also, Sennett's examinations of urban life are confined within a public sphere whose boundaries are delineated by the author *prior* to analyses. As a result, Sennett failed to take into account the ways in which *other* urban spaces or *other* modes of social interactions which were excluded from his analyses could contribute to the construction of meaningful public spheres through practices and actions *from below*.

A similar fixity of interpretation is also manifested in the empiricist conclusion that privatized urban spaces such as shopping malls are essentially deprived of social and political potentials: the category "shopping mall" is analyzed as a pre-given and ontologically static "fact" which determines from above social and cultural processes. While the accounts which these studies provided are empirically grounded, they are also epistemologically closed: they failed to take into account the *alternative* ways of forming collective social life and thus foreclosed the possibilities of *other* time-spaces of participation and practice.

These two analytical problems have led to some unproductive consequences for the study of public space. First, since a large number of studies focused on the ways in which specific types of spaces and conventional modes of social interactions were regulated, much less effort has been made to examine how people can actually interact with others and engage

with public space. Second, since a rigid distinction between exclusion and inclusion has been enacted, most critical analyses of public space simply view public space as a physical container which social processes are located in or removed from. Burdened with these closed epistemological perspectives, the social and political potentials of public spaces are taken as pre-given and ontologically static, coherent and bounded: the public sphere is imagined to be composed of a series of pre-identified spaces designated specifically as rational political forums and/or terrains of social interactions. The *nature* of space is well defined *prior* to actual practices and social processes. Thus our imagination of the possibilities that public space can accommodate is severely constrained: any social or political force which destabilizes the well defined boundary of the public sphere, it seems to us, would suddenly lead to the collapse of its social and political significance.

In this thesis, however, I would like to align my analyses with some other perspectives and approaches which may further enrich our understandings of public space in ways alternative to the literature reviewed in the previous section. In the first place, I advocate an epistemologically more open approach towards public space which focuses on the ways in which space is *actually* practiced and produced by social actors. This approach enables us to examine the processes in which some spaces are rendered exclusionary under particular social, cultural and political contexts, but at the same time it does not foreclose the efforts to actively locate alternative trajectories and search for unanticipated possibilities of participation, interaction and engagement. Also, this approach underscores that there are diverse ways of social interactions. Different modes of mutual engagement all contribute to the production of new social relations and rich cultural meanings. This approach sees no pre-given *form* or *nature* of public space which determines *a priori* its social and political values. Instead, I am interested in the multiple geographies and dynamics which emerge from actual social encounters and immediate social relations. As I will argue in Chapter 3, the progressive potentials of public space do not simply reside in the chances to meet and talk. Rather, a public space which matters in everyday social life is built upon an immense investment of human agencies and labours. It is an ongoing and intense *process* in which social relations are configured, cultural meanings are produced, and identities are negotiated and performed.

Second, I do not view inclusion and exclusion as two mutually separate domains which are epistemologically incompatible with each other. Instead, both inclusion and exclusion will be analyzed as embedded in the microcosms of social relations and interactions. They are not simply imposed from above, but *practiced* through the production of discourses, the negotiation of identities and the configurations of spatial relations. As Watson's (2006)

research on the relationship between public space and difference has revealed, socially inclusive public space is by no means separable from the relations of power and the dynamics of difference. Similarly, exclusion does not simply mean the annihilation of the public realm. As Madden (2010) has insightfully contended, privatizing and regulatory regimes create new visions and conceptions of “publicness”. Thus there is a need to analyze in detail the ways in which these visions and conceptions are actually *enacted*. Thus in my analyses I do not rule out the possibility of the coexistence of inclusion and exclusion. Also, this thesis follows the idea that space is not simply the physical setting in which practices of exclusion and inclusion are carried out. Rather, both inclusion and exclusion works *through* the imagination and production of space and spatial relations. Hence even exclusion and regulation does not necessarily reduce the social and political relevance of public space. In certain cases, inclusion and exclusion can even be mutually constituent. Contradictions between inclusion and exclusion are always extant, but our analyses of the production of space need to be approached from the diverse practices which produce intersecting geographies of inclusion and exclusion at a microscopic level.

In summary, I argue that social and political values of public space are never determined *prior* to social members’ active participation in the construction of the public realm. Public space is constantly *made* and remade through engaged practices which produce and construct the social and cultural turfs of space *from below*. What the rhetoric of the end of public space neglects is that real actors in the production and construction of public space can appropriate spaces in a multiplicity of ways and create complex, often unpredicted meanings and social dynamics. Public space is rarely dominated by a single and unidirectional social or political process. On the contrary, it is often a radical juxtaposition of engagement and disengagement, inclusion and exclusion, hegemonic norm and resistance, oppression and care, *etc.* This is in line with social sciences’ ongoing engagement with grassroots agency which arguably dates back to the works of de Certeau (1984). But instead of celebrating uncritically and romantically everyday appropriation of urban space, my analyses will be firmly articulated with solid structures of social relations and power as well as the social and political effects these structures produce.

Furthermore, public space is not merely the passive container of political activities and social interactions. Rather, it is always a constituent element of the social and cultural fabrics of city life. Public space may be contested or even rendered exclusionary, but very often it is precisely through conflict and contestation that public space is enacted as an irreducible element in the constitution of civic life and political processes. The political and civic ideals of public space need to be re-understood as the points of referent with which we can examine

the complex dialectics between space, social relations and the production of cultural meanings: public space is always a process of *becoming*, of productive practices, and of multiple configurations of meanings and social relations.

Thus Kurt Iveson (2007) argues that rather than mapping political and social activities neatly onto specific spaces, we need to engage with a *procedural* conception of public space: public space is not reduced to a fixed set of topographically defined sites in the city. Rather, public space is understood to be any space which is *made* the site of power, political address, or identity performance through political actions and engaged practices. In this conceptualization, no particular urban space has a privileged relation to specific aspects of publicness. When an established geography of public space is destabilized or disrupted, it does not rule out the possibilities of new emergence and new formation, either in the same site or in somewhere else. Sophie Watson (2006, p. 15) also contends that “space is inherently conflictual and implicated in struggles over inclusions and exclusions”. She contests pessimistic accounts which lament the loss of a once vibrant public life, in particular those in Mike Davis’s (1990) now canonical work *City of Quartz*. Contravening the monolithically apocalyptic portraits of contemporary city life, Watson calls for closer examinations of the people who actually inhabit public spaces and the specific sites and ways of interaction “in their finer-grained texture” (*ibid*).

In *For Space*, Doreen Massey (2005) lists three theoretical propositions for a restructuring of our understanding of space. These propositions are not particularly new but can help us immensely to capture the ways in which space actually works through practices and complex interactive relations. First, there is an intricate dialectic between the social and the spatial. Space is constituted through connections and interactions. The identities/entities, and the relations between them, constitute and are constituted by spatialities. As Massey (2005, p. 101) so thoughtfully argues, it is not the specific *form* of space which guarantees its social, political and ethical connotations. Instead, what is at stake is the *content* of space, namely the multiple relations through which space is constituted (and also lived). Second, space needs to be viewed “as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity” (p. 9). In Massey’s view, there is no trajectory of space which is the single legitimate or the inevitable. Finally, space is always under construction: it is a process rather than a stasis. Space can never be a fully closed system and also demonstrates a radical openness of the future. Space and time are not two mutually exclusive domains, and space is always in the process of emergence and becoming.



This conception of space is in line with the Lefebvrian theorization which focuses on the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). And it is also much more than this. Notably, Massey's second and the third propositions echo with the Deleuzian conception of assemblage which argues that the juxtaposition and alignment of heterogeneous elements do not only produce stability and fixed patterns, but very often also the possibilities of excess, of transformation, and of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, [1987]2004). As Colin McFarlane (2011, p. 24) emphasizes, to view spaces or spatial relations as assemblage is to reject the ghosts of fixity, essence or linear determination: "urban actors, forms or processes are defined less by a pre-given definition and more by the assemblages they enter and reconstitute". McFarlane also suggests that the term assemblage departs from conventional conceptions of space in two ways. First, assemblage does not favour stasis or rigidity. Instead, it is always oriented toward the potential, the possible. In other words, there are always *alternative* ways for us to envisage how our world is co-constituted by the spatial and other events and processes. Second, assemblage is a process of *doing* and *performing*. Spatial and social processes are not passively written onto a fixed template: elements are drawn together at particular junctures but very often these alignments themselves are not stable at all.

Questioning the binary opposition of openness and closure which often dominates our imaginations of place, Massey (2005) writes:

Each of these time-spaces [meaning time-spaces of openness or closure] is relational. Each is constructed out of the articulation of trajectories. But in each case too the range of trajectories which is allowed in is carefully controlled. And each time-space, too, is continually shifting in its construction, being negotiated.

.....

Developing a relational politics around this aspect of these time-spaces would mean addressing the nature of their embeddedness in all those distinct, though interlocking, geometries of power. (pp. 179-180)

Related to Massey's relational reading of time-space, Clive Barnett's (1999; 2005) works employ a Derridean deconstruction and argue that the political value of identities or processes of difference is not determined *a priori* by established concepts and definitions. Thus inclusion of public space does not necessarily contribute to a good society in all the taken-for-granted ways: it very often involves the redrawing of boundaries and the reproduction of otherness. Similarly, exclusion may not simply lead to the dispossession or even annihilation of space: exclusion may contribute to progressive projects sometimes; but in this thesis my argument is that because conflict and contestation always unfold *through* the configuration of space, the social centrality, to borrow Hetherington's (1998) term, of

public space can never be fully annihilated. Space always matters and it is always possible for us to talk about the dialectics between the spatial and the social.

It is of course not my aim to romanticize the agencies of space and social actors at the expense of a critical assessment or normative evaluation of public space. In this thesis, I employ the assemblage thinking mainly as an epistemological, analytical and methodological orientation which guides my interpretations of the complex dynamics through which space is constructed. Yet, I do not intend to dismiss attention to political economy and consolidated structures of social power (Brenner *et al.*, 2011). Perhaps even structural factors can be deconstructed as assemblages of social actors and material conditions, but it is not my aim to extend the poststructuralist register in my analyses to such a radical extreme. In so doing I try to keep a normative and critical edge in our examinations of public space. As Olson and Sayer (2009) have argued, a regime of normativity must always stand. My argument, on the other hand, is simply that the political relevance of public space cannot be unproblematically understood in terms of the binary opposition of exclusion and inclusion. Instead, we need to take into account how various processes and possibilities coexist and co-constitute in the production of public space as assemblage.

### **The many time-spaces of public space**

At an empirical level, a relational and non-essential reading of public space can be approached from a number of perspectives. As a point of departure, one classic critique of bounded readings of the political and civic ideals of public space is that rather than a romantic realm of unfettered social interaction and idea exchange, public space, and the public sphere in general, are actually highly contested and full of conflicts, dissonances and struggles. Public space and public sphere are always constituted in agonistic relations – they are always in a state of becoming and emergence, producing exclusion, conflict and contestation across various lines of difference (Watson, 2006; Connolly, 1998). Indeed, as Collins (2010) suggests, it is more often through agonistic relations rather than harmony that we grasp the complexities of urban processes. Over history, public sphere has never lived up to the promise to include all members of the society. The Greek *agora* and Roman *forum* were only open to a small group of people who were entitled as citizens. Women, slaves and foreigners were strictly excluded from those spaces. Similarly, in Haussmann's Paris the opening of boulevard was followed by the bourgeois class's efforts to privatize street spaces and control the mobility of the urban poor (McLaughlin and Muncie, 1999; Harvey, 2006).

The bourgeois public sphere extolled and advocated by Habermas is also a highly exclusive one: in this paradigm of rational political negotiation only members of the

bourgeois class have access to the political forum of the liberal democracy (Habermas, 1989; Howell, 1993; Fraser, 1990). Besides, many critics have pointed out that the Habermasian model of public sphere is to a large extent a masculine one. Feminist scholars have argued that women were usually excluded from rational political deliberation and thus were strictly constrained within the private domain (Deutsche, 1996; Fraser, 1990; 1991; Bondi, 1998; Marston, 1990; Staeheli, 1996). Pateman (1989) once pointed out that liberal public sphere was held up by a masculinist assumption that women and what they symbolized should be excluded since the disorderly irrationality of women would erode rational political debate and idea exchange. Hence, Benhabib (1996, pp. 205-206) argues explicitly that “all hitherto ‘publics’ have rested on the exclusion of certain groups of individuals from participation or deliberation”: the *public* itself is an ambiguous term implying inclusion as well as exclusion, and the realization of a public must be dependent on the boundary between the “we” and the “they”.

Recognizing the inherently exclusive nature of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser (1990) proposes the concept of counter-publics – a multitude of social and political collectives which contests the exclusionary nature of the bourgeois public sphere and celebrates alternative political behaviours and social norms. Fraser promotes a new regime of public politics where “arrangements that accommodate contestations among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (p. 66). Fraser’s thesis forcefully contends that in the complex webs and dynamics of social life there are many *publics*, rather than a single, unitary public: the counterpublic political spheres provide subordinate social groups with the opportunity to speak out in “one’s own voice” to construct, enact and express diverse social positions and cultural identities.

Drawing from the existing literature, I would like to propose some additional viewpoints to further destabilize the rhetoric of the end of public space and also summarize how these insights inform my empirical analyses in the following chapters. First of all, we need to note that despite all those regimes of privatization and revanchist regulation, there are still engaged uses and rich practices in public spaces. Such practices emerge not only in the conventional political forums or civic spaces, but in all types of spaces that can be appropriated for a variety of uses and purposes. There are no fixated uses associated with a particular type of spaces – a space may have its primary or legitimate functions, but as Lefebvre (1991) reminds us, every space is inherently a human *oeuvre*. It is the assemblage of multiple layers of meanings and texts – a palimpsest which is always open to writing and rewriting. The burgeoning literature on young people’s appropriation of public spaces in the

forms of parkouring, skateboarding and skating is just one example of grassroots' social members' agency in rewriting or even reversing the dominant narratives of urban landscapes. Other examples can be found in Shields's (1989) and Tyndall's (2008) counter-narratives to the apocalyptic depictions of social life in the shopping malls (e.g. Hopkins, 1990; Goss, 1993; 1999). In these two studies, the authors analyzed mall visitors' multiple spatial narratives and spatial performances not constrained by the dominant definition of consumerist identity and how unbounded understandings of the "publicness" of the malls emerged from engagement and practices.

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, my analyses will all focus on grassroots social members' active practices in banal urban spaces. A place for leisure may be the predominant definition of these spaces, but it is also interesting to see how ordinary urban people construct their own webs of social relations and cultural meanings, whether for the performance of identities, for the negotiation of "abnormal" homosexuality, or for the production and reproduction of political attitudes. In all these cases, social members and cultural identities are not only *allowed to be seen* in the public. Their spatial practices unfold in ways which an aesthetic of visibility cannot sufficiently account for. As Loretta Lees (1997; 2001) once commented, the widely accepted understandings and representations of any particular public space are by no means exhaustive of its social and cultural energies and potentials. Instead, we need to acknowledge that meanings of space come to realization only through our active inhabitation of it – "the 'happening' of understanding is something performed by investigators engaging actively with the world around them and in the process changing them both" (Lees, 2001, p. 57).

Second, it is also essential to note that every space is inherently ideological. This conviction leads to two important viewpoints. First, there is no absolutely ideal public space which is completely free of the relations of power and the interruptive effects of difference. The political and civic ideals associated with public space can certainly be achieved, but they are always implicated in the reconstitution of social relations. Second and more importantly, the management and regulation of public space across lines of difference are by no means new phenomena. As Cresswell's (1996) well-known theory of place reminds us, the social and cultural construction of place is always-already situated in a complex system of discourses, knowledge and norms. Social members can of course contest the entrenched structure of hegemonic knowledge, but in doing so we are creating new possibilities and configurations of discourses, narratives and knowledge, rather than eradicating them altogether. The works of Sibley (1995) and Watson (2006) also argue explicitly that our complex understandings of, and attitudes towards difference are always projected onto

spatial practices: the strangers and others are often the mirror images of the part of the self which we fear and detest. Thus Di Masso (2012, p. 124) points out that “behaviour in public is regulated by normative representations that tell us what actions are (in)appropriate, which spatial uses are (not) expected under specific circumstances, and who is (not) a legitimate public within the confines of “normal” coexistence”.

In his analyses of the social life in Rio de Janeiro’s coastal beaches, James Freeman (2002; 2008) brings to our attention how an assumedly democratic space of unconstrained interaction and participation is in fact crosscut by subtle social boundaries enacted around the axes of race and class (also Godfrey and Arguinizoni, 2012). In Chapter 3, I will analyze the moments of identity performance in Chinese people’s everyday public space. While the picture I will present looks fairly benign and socially inclusive, it is not a fixed pattern which forecloses the possibilities for the emergence of new social relations. Some of these new sets of relations are socially progressive and even facilitate mutual care and acknowledgement, but in other cases certain relations are also shaped by entrenched prejudices, discriminations and social inequalities. In the meantime, however, it may also be added that no moral judgement on inclusion or exclusion should be made *prior* to a closer scrutiny of the immediate social, cultural and political dynamics. Exclusion is not naturally the equivalent to the exercise of hegemonic power. Iveson’s (2003) study of McIvers Ladies’ Baths in Sydney, for example, presents a counter-discourse to the monolithic assumption that exclusion necessarily leads to the annihilation of difference. Iveson’s analysis shows that the women bath users’ insistence on the exclusion of the baths to male users is based on a gendered claim that the women’s right to using the baths and forming a public sphere free of masculine intervention must be maintained through a certain degree of enclosure.

In Chapter 6, I will analyze how the regulation of public space works within a terrain of ideologies and discourses. With that particular research I want to show that our representations and practices of spaces are the constituent elements, rather than simply the outcomes, of the structures of social relations and power. In this sense, the practices of regulation make public space no less central to our civic and political engagements. Instead of envisaging ideal public spaces free of regulatory practices, I suggest that a more productive perspective concentrates on how ideological regimes operate to reconstitute the social and cultural fabrics in microscopic spaces and how these ideological operations speak back to the wider structures of social relations and power. As John Allen (2006) argues, the regulatory power is not always in the form of coercive force: very often it resides in the taken-for-granted understandings and representations of space, the material designs of space (see Kärholm, 2008) and even the practitioners of space being motivated to self-regulate.

Thus it can be an interesting terrain of research to investigate how rationales for the regulation of space are differently configured under specific social, cultural and political conditions. For example, the collaborative works of geographers Mark Jayne, Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine have presented interesting accounts of how drinking behaviours in the public and the private are closely intertwined with the gender-based public/private division (Jayne *et al.*, 2006; 2008; Holloway *et al.*, 2009; see also Kneale, 2001). In cases of this nature, the management of public space is not out of business interests or revanchist oppression of the disorderly, but operates alongside the lines of traditions, moral convictions and cultural identities. Yet, these subtle cultural and ideological operations are intrinsically political and productive of both social inequalities and relations of domination (e.g. Alhadar and McCahill, 2011; Anjaria, 2009; Popke and Ballard, 2004; Hubbard, 2004; Jackson, 1988; 1992). If we engage with the questions such as why the French do not like the Islamic headscarves in the public (Bowen, 2007), we find that even when space is not thoroughly enclosed and everyone is legally entitled to be present in space, public space is far from a tranquil heaven but always ideological laden and contested. This issue will also be touched upon in both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

Sometimes, particular rationales for the regulation of public space may even disrupt conventional understandings of law, policy, right or citizenship. For example, the regulation of homeless people and other marginalized social groups is not a unitary policy field even within the Western context. As Johnsen and Fitzpatrick (2010) point out, the regulation of homeless people in England goes beyond the revanchist logic and has indeed taken into account the wellbeing of the targeted social groups (see also Atkinson, 2003). In Chapter 6, I will also engage with Nicholas Blomley's (2011) recent theoretical intervention into the constitution of police power. In this model of space policing, the discourses in urban policies avoid making any explicit references to the questions of power, politics and right. Instead, public space are defined as merely functional space for utilitarian purposes, and the exclusion of those behaviours which do not fit with the utilitarian vision of space is justified on the basis of technological rationality rather than legal definitions of right and citizenship (also Blomley, 2007a; 2007b; 2010).

Third and related to the first and second points, we should also note that public space is very often the juxtaposition of regulation *and* active practices. In many cases, social members carve out possibilities of engagement even in face of hegemonic regulatory regimes. On the one hand, spatial practices are often employed as the forceful resistance to dominant powers. We must be aware, as Mitchell (2003a) argues, that the democratic ideal of the public space as the centre of participatory urban life is never guaranteed. Instead, it

must be *won* through different forms of struggles. Thus Iveson (2010b) comments that critical analysis of the social construction of public space must go beyond exposing the dichotomous relations of domination/subordination and look more closely at the agency of the marginalized social groups to creatively mobilize the space as the venue of resistance. As Staeheli (2010) points out, each of these struggles stages a resistance to established patterns of order, and to achieve the aim of democratization these struggles must rely on disruption, chaos and disorder. Indeed, as Paddison and Sharp (2007) argue, it is precisely from these conflicts and struggles that we can conclude that public space is still intrinsically essential to both everyday social life and the cultivation of grassroots political agency.

But in the same time, social members' responses to hegemonic norms and moral standards are often more complicated than the unidirectional logic of resistance. The public space is an ongoing dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. In the social construction of public space, power is contingently produced through social relations between multiple publics (Fraser, 1990; Sharp *et al.*, 2000). How do people in the public differently orient their subject positions and behaviours to negotiate the fluid boundaries between normal and abnormal, right and wrong, acceptable and undesirable? This answer can be as complex as the diverse configurations of social processes themselves. In some cases, we see people carefully negotiating the dominant rules and norms of public space to reorient their behaviours rather than directly acting against hegemonic structures of power (Young, 2003; Driskell *et al.*, 2008). Mona Domosh's (1998) description of women's tactical transgressions in negotiating the upper-class values inscribed in the streets of New York City is one classic example of this micro-politics of public space. In other cases, however, social groups which are labelled deviant and disorderly may even conform to the dominant norms of space by rendering their behaviours more "normal" and "acceptable" (Nolan, 2003; Spinney, 2010). In Chapter 4, I will present an analysis of Chinese gay men's spatial practices in a renowned urban park. Throughout my ethnographic accounts I will attempt to argue that although gay men's presence in the public certainly challenges the dominant public/private divide prescribed by hetero-normativity, their negotiation with the norms and moral standards of space enhances, rather than challenges, their cultural marginality in the society.

Finally, it comes to the issue of political expression in the public. It might be true that with the dominance of mass circulated popular culture the bourgeoisie class or a clearly defined social community is nowadays less interested in rational political debates in a shared political forum. But in the same time we need to note that public space is inherently open to political expressions. Space is rendered the centre of ideas and attitudes not only because it acts as the material setting for political expressions to take place, but also because it

catalyzes the experience, negotiation and production of political attitudes and identities. As Mitchell (1995) argues, the right to free speech or being seen in the public is not a privilege naturally attached to public spaces. Rather, it is *won* through the contested and competing visions of *what* can be said in *where*. In other words, we need to pay attention to the ways in which space is *made* political through engaged actions and practices. Very often these practices of space do not fit seamlessly with the Habermasian model of public sphere. Political ideas are exchanged through “serious talks” as well as the moments of joy, festivity and even carnival. Such spatial practices do not necessarily take place in those conventional venues of political debates and they are also featured by complex, often irrational ways to exchange, negotiate and contest political meanings.

Eric Laurier and Chris Philo (2007), for example, provide an intriguing account of the English coffee houses as the shared social realms of gathering, communicating and political debating. Questioning the Habermasian assumption that civic public sphere is built upon the rational-critical principles of bourgeois class their study presents “the rhythms of a typical day spent in a busy coffee-house, punctuated by the differing constituencies of coffee-drinkers who arrive at different hours, each inscribing upon the space their own discursive ways of conversing” (p. 260). Political identities are neither unitary nor static – they are continually asserted, contested and produced in differently configured interactive moments. In a similar way, Cooper (2006) also challenges the assumption of rational communicative actions underlying the model of liberal democracy. In his study of the Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park, Cooper forcefully demonstrates that political negotiation in the Speakers’ Corner was far from linear and rationally oriented. On the contrary, it was a highly diversified and contested field saturated with proselytizing, political ranting, verbal nonsense, personal insults, play combats, and random encounters with the strangers who are not necessarily included in the same political community. Cooper’s research foregrounds the carnivalesque and comic nature of the Speaker’s Corner as a lively public sphere filled with the negotiations of difference and diverse ideas.

In Chapter 5, I will provide an analysis of how political identities and attitudes are not simply transported to an established political forum, but performed and reproduced through grassroots social members’ negotiations with various cultural symbols and their active participation in the production of political meanings. In a series of works connecting the reconfiguration of spatial relations to the reshaping of political identities, Mitchell (1996; 2002; 2003b; 2005), Mitchell and Staeheli (2005) and D’Arcus (2003; 2004; 2006) have very well demonstrated that spaces or spatial relations are the constituent elements, rather than the physical containers, of political agency and identities. Echoing this stance, Chapter



5 will elaborate on the cultural and political energies immanent to spatial practices and examine the performance and reproduction of political attitudes in a non-bourgeoisie, non-rational political forum.

### **Public space in non-Western contexts**

In concluding this chapter, I would like to present a very brief review of the recently booming literature on public spaces in non-Western contexts to shed light on the complexities of social life in public space. Both the political and civic ideals associated with public spaces undergird the analyses in this body of literature, but authors which focus on the non-Western contexts seem to adopt more fluid and flexible perspectives in situating these normative ideals into grounded spatial practices. It is not my argument that the nature of public space in the non-Western contexts is essentially different from that in the West. As I have proposed earlier, if we view space as the assemblage of complex meanings, practices and social relations, there is no ontological difference between spaces across various geographical locations. The reason for developing a separate overview of this literature is that so far studies on the non-Western contexts have shown a richness and flexibility in analytical perspectives which is more often unseen in the mainstream literature focusing mostly on Anglo-American cities.

Given the increasingly fluid nature of global capital, there is an imperative to contextualize the production of urban (public) space in non-Western cities under the logics of global capitalism and the dissemination of the ideas of civilization and modernity (e.g. Connell, 1999; Erkip, 2003; de Koning, 2009a; 2009b). As a result, in many non-Western cities urban processes related to the production of public space in many aspects resonate with their counterparts in the West. However, if the social and cultural transformations of public space in non-Western contexts can be situated in particular societal changes, those changes must be interpreted as unique trajectories of context-specific *modernities*. As Robinson (2006) argues, the global circulation of the notion of modernity should not be seen as merely mimicry, but rather appropriation. The term “*modernity*” itself can only be understood in particular social, economic, political and cultural conditions to see how it acts as a form of *social liberalization* and *cultural transformation* rather than a monolithic and hegemonic process imposed upon the “underdeveloped” state of the so-called “Third World”. In saying so, we should acknowledge that urban processes in the non-Western world “reflect a range of diverse borrowings as well as local interventions and histories” (Robinson, 2006, p. 77).

On the one hand, the production of urban public space in non-Western contexts in many ways echoes the accounts of the end of public space documented in the literature on the

cities of the West, given that the logics of capitalist development and neoliberal governance have colonized urban policies of many cities in the Global South. Privatization and regulation of urban space are now commonly seen in the Third World cities. Economic reform and social polarization in these cities have given rise to a newly emergent politics of exclusion (de Koning, 2009b; Connell, 1999; Freeman, 2008; Swanson, 2007). The social and political potentials of public space in inscribing symbolic meanings, expressing individual or collective opinions, and negotiating diverse identities are also equally noteworthy. Public spaces in non-Western cities are widely employed as the socio-political field for inscribing hegemonic symbolic meanings and values of the dominant classes (Low, 2000; Allen, 2007); for contesting hegemonic political power and claiming political opinions (Lee, 2009; HersHKovitz, 1993; Batuman, 2003; Baykan and Hatuka, 2010); for resisting rapacious corporate power keen on capitalizing on and gentrifying traditional neighbourhoods (Sorensen, 2009); for contesting the Islamization of space which challenges the values of secularism (Khondler, 2009); for street children resisting the established norms defining the adulthood of space (Young, 2003); and for re-enacting ethnic identity in rapid social and political changes (Danzer, 2009).

As Low (2000, p. 151) comments on the social production and social construction of public space in Costa Rica, social members' active readings of, participations in, and contestations over public space often render the public realm a visible forum for the expression of ongoing cultural conflicts and socio-political changes. However, a more critical and comprehensive thinking of the production of social and cultural meanings in public space must be based on understandings and interpretations sensitive to the specific social and cultural conditions that put the complex networks of bodies, meanings and social relations into work. For example, as Sorensen (2009) argues, the success of Japanese neighbourhood residents in claiming the right to urban streets is rooted in the Japanese tradition of strong grassroots organizations, particularly under the context of a strong political authority and a weak collective civil society.

Privatization and exclusion of public space which have been observed in Western public space is not strange to cities in the non-Western world, either. Economic reform and structural transformation have triggered intensifying social polarization and spatial segregation in many Third World countries. The newly rising economic elites and middle class colonize urban spaces in accordance with the philosophies of order, civility and security (Caldeira, 1996; Connell, 1999; Erkip, 2003). Spaces of privilege which accommodate exclusively members of the upper and middle classes have risen under various social contexts (de Koning, 2009a; 2009b; Connell, 1999; Spocter, 2007; Capron, 2002).

Corporate power also produced pseudo-public spaces through the commodification and regulation of urban space (Cuthbert, 1995; Cuthbert and McKinnell, 1997). Furthermore, the ideologies upholding neoliberal urban governance have already “headed South” (Swanson, 2007). Against this backdrop, urban spaces in the developing world are now being rationalized and regulated through the mobilization of the dominant discourses of order, civility and economic development (Swanson, 2007; Crossa, 2009; Springer, 2009). Street beggars, vendors and ethnically marginal groups are affected most severely during the neoliberalization of space (Swanson, 2007; Crossa, 2009; Popke and Ballard, 2004; Staudt, 1996).

However, discussion and analyses of public space in non-Western cities must be contextualized under their particular social and cultural trajectories to look at how variable constellations of social, economic and cultural factors produce unique meanings of urban spaces. Rather than dead spaces thoroughly purified to accommodate the interests of capital and economic development, many urban spaces in non-Western cities continue to be lively arenas which accommodate a good diversity of cultural identities and political actions, though they are also open to contestation, conflict and agonistic social relations (Low, 1996, 2000; Drummond, 2000; Edensor, 1998; Law, 2001; 2002; Roth, 2006). While different interests often come into contestation and conflict (Low, 2000; Freeman, 2008), the purification of public space can never be complete. In her research on urban plazas in Costa Rica, Low (2000, p. 35) contends that “Latin American plaza has been identified as a preeminent public space, a source and symbol of civic power, with a long tradition of the city”. In a similar way, Edensor (1998) has written on the rich diversity of social life in Indian streets. In the Indian street life, people develop sophisticated strategies for dealing with the unfamiliar, and the activities on the street involve a spectacular variety including commercial transactions, gossiping, entertainments and other private activities. The level of control and surveillance is generally low. One reason that explains the diversity of public social life in many non-Western countries is the obscure boundaries between the public and the private as well as the frequent use of public space for private/domestic activities such as eating, vending, playing and washing (Drummond, 2000; Edensor, 1998). The blurred boundaries between the public and the private make public spaces important locales for the activities of social reproduction. Diversity, therefore, is negotiated through the banality of everyday life.

Meanwhile, even the politics of exclusion and segregation in non-Western contexts should be carefully investigated with attention to specific social and cultural trajectories. Several observations can be drawn to support this argument. First, the production of exclusive space

often goes beyond the simple logic of capitalist accumulation. The cultural and symbolic dimensions of space often play an equally important role in negotiating the right to the city (Schielke, 2008). For example, various studies have pointed out that the exclusion of public space in South Africa is mainly the legacy of long-standing racial hostility and the apartheid spatial arrangement (Popke and Ballard, 2004; Spocter, 2007; Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo, 2009). Thus Popke and Ballard (2004) argue that the politics of the South African streets is to a large extent about constructing the boundaries between “us” and “them” – the fragile cultural identities must be recaptured and reasserted through new spatial configurations. Such anxiety over the racialized other is also found in the neoliberalization of urban space in Ecuador, where the indigenous Indian people are constructed as intrinsically antithetical to the dominant notions of civility and modernity (Swanson, 2007). Similarly, Anjaria (2009) points out that the middle class Indians’ activism against street vending and the urban poor must be understood in the context of the rise of the Indian bourgeois civil society and the wake of the middle class citizenry. De Koning’s (2009a; 2009b) research on exclusive social spaces occupied by Egyptian professional women suggests that the withdrawal of Egyptian middle class women into secured social spaces is related to their dilemmatic position between the pursuit of a modern *flânerie* identity and the cultural constraints on gendered roles and behaviours imposed by religious doctrines. The feminized and privatized middle class social spaces manifest both the consolidation of class privilege and the entrenched structure of unequal gender relations.

Interestingly, privatized or exclusive public spaces in non-Western cities often act as the arenas of personal liberalization and realization rather than simply places that suffocate democratic citizenship. In both Egypt and Turkey, shopping malls have become important social spaces where the imaginaries of modernity are experienced and appreciated (Abaza, 2001; Erkip, 2003). The enactment of a modern and consumerist identity is not simply the triumph of business interests over authentic social life. Rather, it is often intimately engaged and provides social members with the chances to break out of conventional frameworks of cultural identities (Chua, 2003). As Abaza (2001) and Erkip (2003) both have shown, regulation and social control in Egyptian and Turkish shopping malls are much more flexible than their Western counterparts. Shopping malls very often serve as social spaces which are accessible to people of different income groups and cultural backgrounds. For women in Turkey, for example, the shopping malls as privatized spaces are among the limited amount of spaces in which they can freely participate in social life and mutual interactions. In a similar way, the Islamic decree that women must be veiled in public spaces ironically provide them a chance to present themselves in the public through a strategy of “absent-

presence” as the veiling of body helps to overcome the gendered cultural tension between Islamic women and men (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2006).

In the literature on non-Western public space, regulation and control are often portrayed as more flexible and thus open to negotiation (Capron, 2002). For example, street vendors in Latin American cities often establish grassroots organizations and try to relate themselves to members in the formal public sector so as to gain support from people within the political authority (Crossa, 2009; Staudt, 1996). In doing so, the street vendors are often successful in resisting the entrepreneurial urban governance. Some street vendors are even willing to pay a certain amount of fee to the regulatory authority to show the important role which they play in contributing to the municipal financial revenues (Staudt, 1996). Another noteworthy phenomenon is that in some of the non-Western cities, gated communities exist in close juxtaposition with urban slums as the middle class residents in those residential enclaves are highly dependent upon the domestic household service provided by the urban poor living in neighbouring urban areas (Caldeira, 1996; Connell, 1999). The close proximity between different social groups may sometimes provide new possibilities of social interaction and encounters between the urban middle class and unprivileged social groups.

In the next four chapters I will attempt to present a comprehensive picture of public space in China which is another non-Western social context. Although the empirical situations which I look at are deeply grounded in the social, economic, political and cultural realities of Chinese cities, the analytical contours can potentially shed light on a broader re-conceptualization of public space as a whole. I will start with a portrait of intensive social interactions and mutual engagements in an inclusive public social space, and end with an analysis of the mutually constitutive relations between public space and social power. In accordance with the perspectives which I have put forward, all these chapters will focus on the ways in which social actors participate in the ongoing construction of the public realm and the rich social dynamics which constitute this process.

### Chapter 3 Performing the public man: mapping culture and identities in China's grassroots leisure class<sup>6</sup>

Underneath a freeway overpass, on a vacant concrete traffic island in the middle of bustling Beijing, forty Chinese women in their sixties and seventies, dressed in silk brocaded jackets and padded silk pants, slowly waved lime-green handkerchiefs and fluttered hot pink, white, and green striped fans above their heads...They followed an undulating and circulating pattern, dividing into two rows, then reuniting to form one big group. They danced alongside one another, without partners, moving to the rhythm of five male musicians playing drums, cymbals, and horns at the head of the makeshift city stage. Dressed in dark winter overcoats, knit caps, and heavy woollen scarves, the musicians stood sombrely nearby...

(Chen, 2010, p. 21)

#### Introduction

The text quoted above is an excerpt from Caroline Chen's (2010) ethnographic description of traditional *yangge* dancing by elder people on the streets of the rapidly modernizing Beijing. It vividly captures a popular imagination of many public places in urban China, overflowing with spontaneous collective activities and energized by shifting, dynamic and improvisational displays of cultures and identities. In this research, Chen argues that the elderly employed marginal or "residual" urban spaces to support their old habits and practices, in order to eschew the overarching forces of modernization. Elsewhere, Orum *et al.* (2009), documenting in-detail a multiplicity of everyday spatial practices and cultural activities in Shanghai's streets and parks, calls for attention to the everyday public realm in contemporary urban China and concludes that "public man is alive and well today in Shanghai" (p. 385).

This chapter examines spatial practices and social life in China's urban public spaces which are qualitatively similar to those already investigated by the aforementioned studies – the everyday leisure, entertainment and cultural activities occurring in the public spaces of

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<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, the use of the term "public man" echoes Richard Sennett's (1977) work on "the fall of public man" in late modernity, since Sennett's series of works focused directly on the constitution of the self in relation to the presence of others. I frankly admit the gendered bias which the term "public man" risks conveying. In People's Park and North Gate Square, both men and women are active participants in an emerging grassroots public sphere; and in many cases, the presence of women is even more salient than that of men. Therefore, in this chapter I use the term "public man" in a broad sense, which is inclusive of men, women, and other potential gendered identities.

post-reform urban China which are spontaneously organized by grassroots social members or groups and stay largely outside direct state intervention. As I have suggested in Chapter 2, a good and vibrant public space is much more than a social realm in which ordinary people greet, talk and make random contacts with each other. Instead, a good and energetic public place should be imagined as one where people engage with diverse cultural possibilities created by practices and encounters, and one in which people make heavy cultural and emotional investments. Grassroots public leisure, as Chen's (2010) and Orum *et al.*'s (2009) works indicate, provides a feasible point of departure to embark on this kind of analyses.

In accordance with this perspective, this chapter attempts to understand everyday leisure in China's urban public space not merely as the continuation of a mundane cultural tradition, but as a key arena in which rich cultural meanings are produced and discursively configured, new social connections enacted, and diverse cultural identifications negotiated, practiced and performatively presented. Empirical research in this chapter investigates two public spaces in Guangzhou: the People's Park and the North Gate Square of Sun Yat-sen University (North Gate Square hereafter). Social life in these two sites is snapshot through three parallel scenarios, namely performativity of public teaching, public shows and performances, and the symbolic displays of cultural difference.

This chapter draws on the literature on everyday social life in public space to frame its theoretical basis. It argues that while social life in public space plays a profound role in facilitating social interactions and building up community cohesion (Orum and Neal, 2010), analyses also need to engage with the significance of performativity in constituting cultural meanings and producing everyday identities. Social life in public space extends much beyond greetings and talks. It is a crucial stage on which ordinary people produce symbolic meanings, perform cultural identities and re-imagine their relations to others who share with them the same physical and cultural turf. Performance of meanings and identities gives rise to new sets of social relations amongst those in the public. All these emerging social relations are expressive of the fluid intentions, desires and identifications at play. Some of these relations may be democratic or even stimulate mutual care and friendship; some others, however, may be shadowed by entrenched structures of unequal power. Analyses of such social and cultural processes, I suggest, need to scrutinize closely how people configure their behaviours and bodily practices in the public, how complex symbolic meanings are created through spatial practices, and how cultural identities are produced and performed in both corporeal and discursive ways. In social life of public space, cultural meanings and identities emerge from immediate social encounters and unpredictable flows of bodily practices and communicated symbols. Neither is it possible for us to present an exhaustive answer to the

questions of what the culture in public space is or what cultural identities are being presented in public social life. In the public realm so many stories keep surfacing and resurfacing, and no single interpretive angle is able to unravel the immense heterogeneity embedded in everyday experiences of public space. Co-constituted by juxtaposed terrains of cultural formation, this fabric of meanings and identities is radically decentred, fragmented and dispersed.

In accordance to this argument, cultural identities and cultural meanings should be seen as contingent, unessential and intrinsically performative. Such an analytical approach also rejects the notion of cultural identity as a private matter, but instead situates it in multiple social settings and one's mix with other social members. The public man, after all, is one who is able to play through complex social and emotional ties with others, perform one's position in a social terrain of interactions and give genuine expressions of one's identity to the strangers (Sennett, 1977). Thus we need to focus on the ways in which people configure their actions, behaviours and routines according to the webs of social connections and cultural meanings, and in response to the face-to-face engagements with others (Sennett, 1971; 1994). Certainly, the production of a public culture is based on ordinary people's active and engaged participation in spatial practices. Very often this entails the temporary suspension of certain mainstream social and cultural institutions which favour the passive consumption and downplay intimate engagements (Sennett, 1977).

Sennett (1977) once argued that the public man was steadily declining in the West due to an obsession with private life. In a series of works, Sennett (1971; 1977; 1992; 1994) appeals for attention to the ways in which being-in-the-public fundamentally reshapes our ways of acting and thinking. This chapter does not want to argue that Chinese people are essentially more inclined to going public. Neither do I want to romanticize the public life investigated in this research while ignoring regulatory power at work elsewhere. However, this chapter does concur that the revival of a lively public realm in post-reform Chinese cities provides a valuable lens to examine the production of culture, the renegotiation of social relations and the performance of identities in public social life.

The aim of this chapter is to elaborate public space as the "locus of culture" (Richardson, 1982) with multiple spatial realities and symbolic domains juxtaposed in communicating the fluid dynamics of cultural formation (Low, 2003). It also dedicates particular efforts to map the new, albeit temporary, social relations emergent from and immanent to mundane spatial practices. It suggests that those *evental* social relations which rise and fall in the immediate milieus of spatial practice are not separable from more *contextual* sets of social relations (Simpson, 2008), especially the established social categories and in China particularly the



institutionalized dichotomies of urban/rural, local/non-local (see e.g. Zhang, 2001). In People's Park and North Gate Square, cultural identities are performed and reconfigured through excessive bodily engagement and the production of everyday cultural discourses, but the performative displays of identities are often structured on and crosscut by pre-established social positions: marginalized art teachers, grassroots art enthusiasts, rural migrant workers or more "civilized and educated" urban locals.

### **Everyday public space: from civic humanism to identity performance**

In Chapter 2, I have discussed the notion of the civic humanism associated with public space, which has long been extolled as the quintessential symbol of the civic life of the city. While this vision of civic humanism certainly informs the analyses in this chapter, I also argue that public space is not only a site of random social interaction and community cohesion, but also a constitutive dimension in the formation of cultural meanings and identities (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003). Carr *et al.* (1992) suggest that in the social construction of any public space there is always a symbolic dimension with meanings and values attached to specific spatial practices or experiences. Setha Low (2003) has powerfully advocated the view that *being-in-the-space* is inherently cultural. In her ethnographic study of the public culture in the plazas of San José, Costa Rica, Low (1996; 1997; 1999; 2000) traces the symbolic meanings of public spaces in changing historical contexts, develops a detailed mapping of ordinary individuals' and social groups' appropriation of space, and examines how specific public space behaviours are represented in relations to the dominant geographical imaginations of civic urban spaces. Through "a complex 'culture-making' process in which cultural representations are produced, manipulated, and understood" (Low, 1997, pp. 5-6), space is rendered a relational process of *becoming*, and spatial referents are employed to recall, reconstitute and communicate cultural meanings and experiences (Richardson, 1982; Low, 1996).

Everyday life in urban space is full of abundant social, cultural and political potentials. In many cases, as Hetherington (1998) suggests, public places for lived spatial practices have a social centrality such that they act like shrines for those who step out of the humdrum, conventional everyday life. Hence a cultural analysis of everyday life is a project which aims to prise the rhythms of life out of the standardized routines and excavate from everyday practices the extraordinary, the sensuous, the marvellous and the poetic (Highmore, 2002; Stevens, 2007). On the other hand, as Stevens (2007) argues, everyday life practice is neither tidy nor static. Rather, it is inherently and intrinsically multiple and dynamic, full of

unprogramed encounters, social mixings and explorations of untrodden cultural terrains. Following Lefebvre's (1991; 1996) radical theoretical intervention into the realm of everyday life, Stevens argues that culturally rich public space is composed of "unfettered, unpredictable and above all *expressive* engagement among the full diversity of persons and practices" (p. 11). In other words, everyday life encompasses a whole sum of activities with all the differences, contradictions and heterogeneities between/among them (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Binnie *et al.*, 2007) which can often be glimpsed from the social and cultural production of lived spaces (Soja, 1996; Tiwari, 2010).

Combined, the three registers of social interaction, culture and everyday practice enable us to enter another analytical terrain and examine the performance of cultural identities and subject positions. The research in this chapter draws from the strand of studies which investigates the ways in which cultural identities are performatively represented through everyday practices in public places. In these studies, the intrinsic meanings of identities are constantly reconfigured in specific socio-spatial settings and often through the negotiation with other individuals or social groups. Public space, therefore, is rendered a process of *learning* in which we incessantly reconstruct our understandings of both oneself and the other (Carr *et al.*, 1992).

Sophie Watson (2005; 2006; 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; also Watson and Wells, 2008), in particular, has offered a sophisticated collection of empirical investigations that has enriched our understanding of the complex relationships between historical contexts, practices in public, social encounters and cultural identities. In these studies, cultural identities are never treated as fixated in bounded, pre-established meanings or signifiers. Cultural identities of the *other* are morally and symbolically judged with gazes from *us*, and *our* identities are reconfigured in relation to the presence of outsiders. Thus a publicly displayed Jewish identity may be considered deviant in the re-negotiation of a white English national identity (as in the case of Jewish *eruv*, see Watson, 2005; 2006). Also, in an ordinary street market this white English identity is again reconstituted by recalling the good old days of racial purity. The nostalgic reconfigurations of racial identity are inevitably situated in the immediate socioeconomic contexts and the everyday encounters with the culturally othered social groups (Watson, 2006; 2009a; Watson and Wells, 2005). In most of Watson's works, identity in public space is performed in symbolic and discursive ways. Yet, some other studies have expanded this performative approach towards identity-in-the-public to include discussions of everyday behaviours and corporeal practices (Wilson, 2011; Cloke *et al.*, 2008).

Analytically, studies of identity performance can be informed by a dramaturgical perspective towards everyday life in public. This perspective views public space as a scene or stage in which ordinary city people perform their memory, imagination and aspiration as well as constantly shifting understandings of individual or collective identities (Makeham, 2005). Thus Raban (1974) argues that there is “an intrinsic theatricality of the city” (p. 27). In earlier developments of the idea of urban *theatrum mundi*, theorists such as Simmel ([1903]2002), Goffman (1959; 1963; 1971) and Sennett (1977) tended to assume a *socialized self* which performed some not-so-authentic identity positions to mask a true self-identity. Lofland (1972a; 1972b; 1973), for example, proposes the concept of self-management in the midst of strangers. Self-management is employed to enact appropriate actions, to demonstrate a “best face” of personal status and to project a “right identity” to the outsiders. Goffman (1971) also suggests that people employ information control in public interactions to “govern the imputations that are made regarding his identity and hence his intent” (p. 254). The information conveyed to the outside is usually aligned with abstract notions such as good personal quality, high social status, or material wealth.

Yet, more recent theoretical advancement has argued that performative display of identities should not be viewed as a deceptive mask concealing a somewhat innermost, authentic identity or self. Instead, we need to focus on the immediate social, cultural and spatial contexts of encounters and excavate the extraordinary cultural energies and possibilities emergent from performative displays of meanings and identities. Analyses armed with this approach assume no internal, authentic self-position separable from a socially mediated cultural identity. Rather, only within an assemblage of social connections and relations can the meanings of cultural identities be fully explored and comprehended. Such an analytical approach echoes Madanipour’s (2003) forceful critique of the separation of urban performativity from the social and historical context in which it is played out. Elijah Anderson’s (1990; 1999) work on the street etiquette in racially mixed inner city neighbourhoods, for example, presents a telling example of how the art of “acting right” is inextricably interwoven with concrete social and spatial relations, as well as broader structural factors.

In sum, it is essential to understand the *new* meanings, identities, and social relations that performative acts can engender in the social life of public space. Culture, after all, is not pre-given, but actively played out in practice. Unexpected encounters with others in public urge us to actively negotiate their presence, often outside the predetermined routines of sociality. Such encounters, therefore, often inspire new desires, stimulate new social relations and create new symbolic meanings (Stevens, 2007). As Crouch (2003) argues, performative activities can exert re-configurative and re-constitutive effects: they motivate us to rethink and reconfigure the self, and activate the production of new attitudes, new imaginaries and

new understandings. Crouch's argument is reflected nicely in Harrison-Pepper's (1990) study of street performing in New York. In this study, Harrison-Pepper vividly documents the energies, excitement, enthusiasm and happiness that street performers experience as well as the shifting social relations of friendship, mutual help and temporary tensions. Hence Lefebvre (2004) calls for more engaged analysis of the rhythms of everyday life, a craft of interpretation which extends beyond visual representations and focuses instead on the bodily engagements, meanings, interactions, and social relations which constitute a constantly undulating and shifting temporality of social life (Simpson, 2008; 2011; forthcoming).

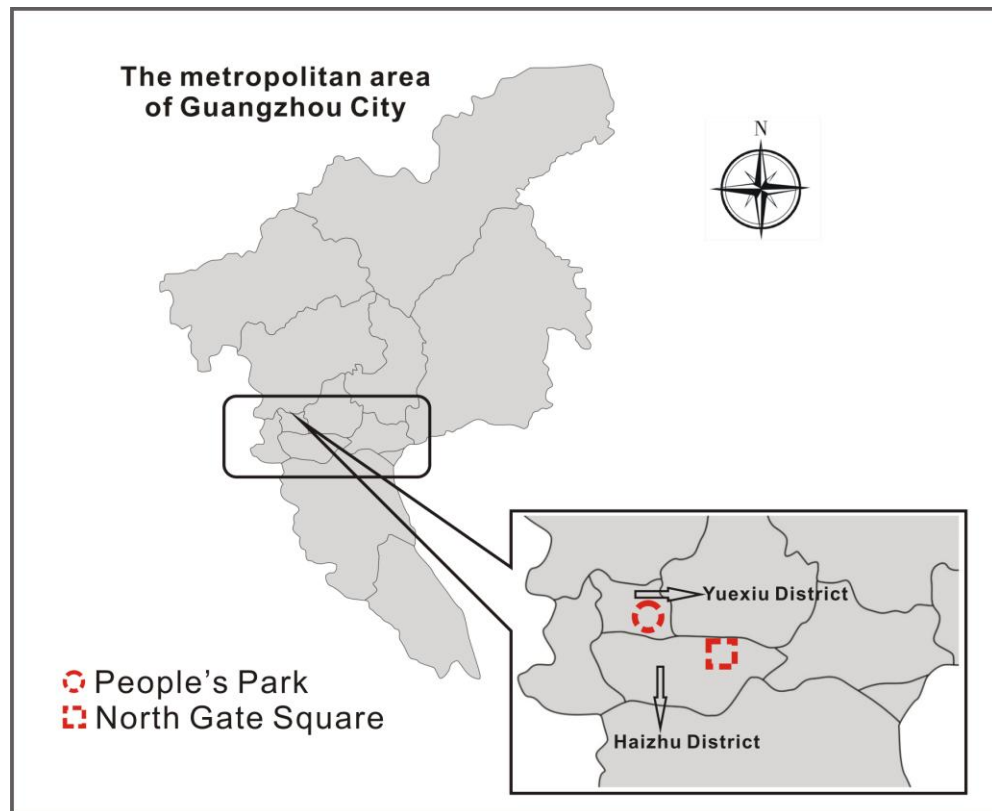
## **Methods**

The empirical study of this chapter is conducted at two urban public spaces: People's Park and the North Gate Square of Sun Yat-sen University. People's Park is located in the centre of Guangzhou's old town area. Built in 1918, it is the first modern park in Guangzhou's urban history. Designed with an Italian architectural style with Renaissance symmetry, elegant gardening and several Chinese-style pavilions spotted throughout the Park, People's Park is commonly seen by the urbanites in Guangzhou as the hallmark of the city's urban modernity. Prior to 1998, the park charged a small entrance fee to its visitors. But in 1998 the brick walls surrounding the park were demolished at the behest of Guangzhou Municipal Government. Since then entrance to the Park has been free of charge. Due to its symbolic significance and central location, the park attracts visitors from throughout the central city to participate in leisure and collective cultural activities.

The North Gate Square, on the other hand, is a much more recent construction. Although legally a property owned by Sun Yat-sen University, it was built with municipal funding to celebrate the University's preeminent status as one of the leading national universities in Mainland China. As a trade-off, the University opened the square to the general public free of charge, and handed over its management to the Haizhu District Government. Initially, the square was built as an urban spectacle with sophisticated greening and the University's north gate erected in the form of an imposing traditional Chinese arch. But soon after its construction, ordinary people began to gather in the square for leisure activities. In contrast to People's Park, the everyday use of the square is largely restricted to adjacent neighbourhoods, mainly due to its smaller size and slightly peripheral geographical location.

In the field, I used non-participant observation and in-depth interviews to collect qualitative data. On the one hand, observational work was undertaken from August to November, 2011. Collective activities in mornings, afternoons and evenings were all subject

to close observation. Each time I would observe only one particular collective activity, but in documenting it comparisons were frequently made with regard to other activities taking place in the field sites. The observational work has resulted in detailed field notes, as well as 88 video clips taken of those collective activities. In addition to the on-site observation, 42 in-depth interviews were conducted with a variety of participants in public space activities (n=37), as well as managerial staff of both the park and the square (n=5).



**Figure 3-1 The locations of People's Park and North Gate Square in Guangzhou**



**Figure 3-2 The front gate of People's Park, Guangzhou**  
(Source: photograph by the author)



**Figure 3-3 The University's North Gate and the Square**  
(Source: photograph by the author)

## Public space leisure in post-reform Guangzhou

This section sketches the context and background for the following empirical analyses. The title of this chapter is informed by Veblen's (2007) canonical theory on the modern leisure class. In Guangzhou, it is also ordinary urban people's pursuit of entertainment, leisure and foremost, happiness that has transformed urban public spaces into the stages/scenes of performativity and collective festivity. However, in a sharp contrast to the paradigm of commercialized, institutionalized leisure in the modern Western society (as proposed by Veblen), everyday leisure in Guangzhou's parks and squares still resides fundamentally outside the logic of commodification. Leisure activities, in the case of this research, are actualized via shared needs, desires, emotions and human energies, rather than the buying of fun through economic capital.

Functionally, both People's Park and the North Gate Square fit well with the category of classic Olmstedian urban public spaces (Low *et al.*, 2003; Carr *et al.*, 1994), which accommodate everyday sociality, leisure and recreational activities. But unlike the social life in their Western counterparts, in both two sites the significance of random, unexpected conversation, encounter and social interaction is usually secondary to group leisure and cultural activities organized by grassroots urban residents. In most cases, these group activities are initiated by one or two core group members, organized spontaneously and sustained on the basis of shared interest in a particular activity. Usually, collective leisure and entertainment in the park and the square are in the form of public performing, singing, group dance, ballroom dance or Latin dance, with fewer groups practicing street-dance, Tai-chi, Chinese *kung fu* and Chinese chess. Normally, a group leader or teacher is present for coordinating collective activities. With few exceptions, participants in those public leisure activities are from working class or lower-middle-class background; and the presence of rural migrant workers are also common.

Territoriality and temporality are essential in maintaining the socio-spatial order in the two sites. In People's Park, due to the large amount of activity groups, each group is allocated by the Park Managerial Authority a specific space and a fixed time slot such that temporal-territorial conflicts are less likely to occur between different groups. In the North Gate Square, due to its proximity to the University and several residential high-rises, leisure activities are allowed only in the early morning and from 7 pm to 10 pm. In the daytime, most participants in group activities are seniors or retirees; but in the evening, participants normally come from a wide range of ages.

While Chen (2010) views public leisure in urban China as the escape from overwhelming forces of modernization, my point of view is that it may be a more productive approach to situate the (re)emergence of public leisure into the immediate social, cultural and political contexts of China's post-reform urban modernity. In the first place, it is the political liberalization since China's economic reform, albeit to a very limited extent, that has created a favourable social and political atmosphere for the emergence of spontaneously organized grassroots leisure. As several interviewees in this study have commented, in the Maoist China the state was responsible for the organization of almost all leisure activities, partly to ensure the "ideological correctness" in the everyday practice of culture and leisure. The provision of leisure and cultural activities was part of the state-led welfare system, and normally undertaken through the governing body of the neighbourhood or one's workplace (see Huang, 2006). Leisure and cultural activities outside the framework of the omnipresent state, on the other hand, were strictly censored and constrained. Therefore, the revival of public space leisure is inextricably interwoven with China's post-reform social and cultural transformation. In both the park and the square, the repertoire of cultural activities is now much more diverse than in the Maoist time, and performance of the self extends much beyond the homogeneous identity of "socialist people". Certain forms of cultural activities – in particular ballroom dance and Latin dance – which were previously viewed as too "Western" or too "bourgeois" are now commonly practiced:

In the Maoist time, people were not "open" enough. They stuck to the old notion that the themes of cultural activities could only be about Marxism, the revolution and socialism. If you undertook cultural or leisure activities without any direct reference to those themes, they would name you a "corrupted capitalist bourgeoisie". So people did not dare to organize cultural activities from below – all the public gatherings and public performances were organized by the government through your workplace. The situation has been changed completely after the Reform, and people's mind now is much more open. (Interview 01102011A)

On the other hand, in the post-reform urban China leisure and entertainment are becoming increasingly commodified. Commercialized leisure and entertainment, especially with regard to professional theatre, opera, cinema and dancing places, have become excessively expensive to average working-class and lower-middle-class social members. The intensifying processes of marketization, commodification and social polarization have consolidated a cultural institution to which the access is calibrated with economic capital. Public space leisure, on the other hand, can be seen as ordinary urbanites' tactical resistance to the colonization of everyday leisure by capitalist economic relations and the logic of commodity.



In fact, both People's Park and North Gate Square can be seen as somehow unconventional social sites in which the *use value* of everyday social life transcends the logic of exchange value (Ruppert, 2006; Stevens, 2007). This is not to say that no economic cost is involved in public space leisure. On the contrary, the actualization of use value is often mediated by the involvement of money. For many groups, money plays an indispensable role in sustaining activities. But here the use of money performs rationalities outside the unilinear logic of commodification. For example, most dancing groups in the two research sites are led by a professional/semi-professional dancing teacher. Often, the teacher takes public leisure as part of his/her pursuit of a dancing career and does not seek substantial monetary profit from it. But in the same time, he/she would also expect small economic return for the material resources, time and labour dedicated to the organization of dancing activities. The group members, on the other hand, are usually willing to pay the teacher a small amount of money (normally a monthly payment of 20- 40 Chinese RMB per person, which is roughly 3- 6 US dollars). For a group consisting of 20-30 participants, the sum of monthly payment acts as a notable support to the teacher's career, as well as the token of acknowledgment and respect for the time and labour that he/she has dedicated. This relation of money offer works to maintain the mutual rapport between the teacher/organizer and the participants, which also helps to keep the group activities going. For participants interviewed, such a small amount of payment is often seen as "not worth mentioning" compared to the myriad possibilities of joy, entertainment, community formation and social interactions these activities have promised. Thus the dancing teacher's intent on economic return is interpreted not in terms of profit-making, but rather the respect for the teacher's dedication and all group members' collective effort to sustain a shared social and cultural territory:

We have a dancing teacher in our group which teaches us traditional Chinese dancing. She is also an ordinary member in this group. But since she received professional dancing training and were also willing to organize the activities and do the choreography, we elected her as our teacher. Every month each of us pays her 30 RMB, which is a very small amount of money. You know, there are also many costs in her work: she needs to purchase some audio equipment, repair it sometimes, buy memory sticks to restore music sound tracks, access the Internet for good pieces of music... Aside from all those costs, there may be some surplus. But if there is indeed any, it should be quite meagre. You can see it as a small reward for her devotion to this group, and her purpose is simply to sustain a career, a pursuit, but not to make profit. (Interview 29092011A)

The role that money plays in facilitating the realization of everyday use value, rather than alienating daily life from it, is also manifest in public performing in the two sites. In this case, public performing is out of group members' personal enthusiasm for dancing, singing and other forms of performance, rather than the purpose of money-making. Equipped with

sophisticated musical and audio instruments, public performing can be economically costly. In usual circumstances, public performers would simply pay the economic costs themselves, and for them the entertainment in the public certainly “deserves the money”. But more often than not, they also receive donations from the audience. Each time, the amount of donation is normally 5-10 RMB per donator, but can sometimes be as small as 1 RMB. For the public performers, however, the amount of the money is never a prioritized concern. Rather, both the performers and the audience view the donations as a token of care, support and friendship, rather than a means of “buying” entertainment.

In sum, this chapter views both People’s Park and North Gate Square as spaces which disrupt, though only symbolically and temporarily, predominant economic, social and cultural institutions; and the ultimate value of these two public places lies in happiness, entertainment, the exploration of personal needs, intents and desires, and the unfettered displays of heterogeneous cultural identifications. Everyday leisure participants are free to explore their desires, feelings and identities in a multiplicity of vectors, often unconstrained by conventional economic and social relations. Thus identity positions excavated via everyday spatial practices are always characterized by remarkable heterogeneity and unpredictability. In all the three scenarios that I will investigate, the topmost use value of public leisure lies in possibilities to perform the most valued images of self-identities.

## **Performing meanings and identities in public leisure**

### **Scenario 1: self-actualization and the performativity of public teaching**

In People’s Park and the North Gate Square, most dancing groups (and also some *kung fu* groups) are led by a teacher. Those teachers are normally professionally or semi-professionally trained, and their responsibility is to impart dancing skills to ordinary leisure activity participants – who are referred to as the “students” – so that everyday leisure can become “more purposeful” and better articulated with “professional art”. Often, these dancing teachers are also employed in the professional dancing training sector; but most of them are nonetheless marginalized and less competitive in the formal institution of commodified art training. As a result, they are now seeking part-time teaching opportunities in small discotheques and also urban public places. Normally, the class identity of the dancing teachers is not radically distinct from their students in the public “classrooms”. As indicated above, each student would pay the teacher a small amount of money on a monthly basis as a reward for the time and energy devoted by him/her.

These public spaces outside the mainstream institution of cultural consumption offer those teachers not only a small extra income, but also a valuable stage upon which their identity as teacher and the desire to teach can be enacted and performed. Due to their marginality in the mainstream institution of art training, the opportunities of teaching provided by public social life appear to be very important to them. In public events of dancing, the teacher introduces his/her established workplace persona into spatial practices and transforms the bodily routines and symbolic meanings of the dancing site to fit with this identity position. Public leisure, certainly, is not an institutionalized setting of educational endeavours – on the contrary, it seems meant to be loose and “chaotic”. But in the dancing teachers’ narratives, this style of leisure is too “superficial and meaningless”. Hence they attempt to redefine social life in the public by drawing from their professional identity. Through interactive engagement with ordinary leisure participants, these floating dancing teachers instil into previously “disorganized” public leisure a dimension of “high and professional culture”.

The social relation of teacher/student is performed in accordance to three symbolic connotations. First of all, a teacher is self-presented as someone who always pursues high quality performance as well as the perfection of his/her students’ learned skills. Second, a well trained dancing teacher is expected to possess *professional* and also *formal* knowledge of dancing skills. In other words, such a teacher’s identity is closely associated with his/her familiarity with the *standard* routines in professional dancing performance. In a ballroom dance group in People’s Park, for example, the teacher extends this “professional spirit” to such an extent that he chooses to teach in English, despite his apparently limited ability in actually manoeuvring this language. Ignoring his students’ noticeable suffering from the language he uses, Mr X – a registered member of the International Dancing Teachers’ Association (IDTA) – insists that professional dancing training is inseparable from the authenticity of the way of teaching:

Ballroom dance is about culture, it is about art. It is not something to be improvised, and it is not something that can be taught in whatever way you like. It has its standards, its criteria, and it is all about an authentic cultural atmosphere in practice. Since it is something imported from the West, it should be more professional to use a Western language to teach it. (Interview 16082011A)

Finally, the cultural image of being a teacher also suggests his/her own mastery of higher dancing skills. It implies a temporary social relation of authority and control. In the events of public teaching, the teacher does not often join the students in dancing. But when he/she actually does, he/she always attempts to demonstrate his/her professional and technical superiority over the students by re-affirming his/her routines of bodily motions as the

standard and the normative. In other words, the performed distinction of professional/amateur helps the teacher to get hold of his/her self-identity as the authoritative and the professional.

A specific event of public teaching often turns public space into a spectacular stage of urban theatricality. In many aspects, the social setting of public teaching resembles the genuine public realm that Sennett (1971; 1977) has envisaged – one not characterized by de-socialized harmony or passive peace, but filled with productive tensions and active engagements. In many dancing groups, the students are required to wear a special dancing uniform, and the punctuality for arriving on the dancing site is also strictly observed. The students are required to dance in harmony with the musical rhythms as well as with each other. Normally, the teacher would do the choreography him/herself prior to the dancing event; and the standards for dancing quality are somehow formalized alongside the choreographic work. During the teaching, the teacher would dance a specific piece first and give detailed instructions to the students in order to set up the standards of dancing and affirm the quality that he/she would expect from the students. From an outsider's point of view, the teaching process appears rather serious and it turns the predominant social ambience in the dancing site into one of the classroom. The students would then begin their own practice, and at this stage teaching is mostly verbal rather than bodily.

To secure the high quality of students' dancing relies upon the teacher's endless attempts to correct the bodily motions of the students: the dancing event is abruptly interrupted by the teacher from time to time who would then repeat several times the "correct" version of the bodily motion, often coupled with painstakingly detailed verbal instructions. The teacher's explicit criticism of the students is also common. Often, the entire group of students is criticized for a shared imperfection in their performance; but sometimes the criticism goes to a particular participant, putting him/her in a fairly embarrassing situation. In many cases, the criticism from the teacher could be very harsh – both in terms of wording and the teacher's facial expression. In one Latin dance group located in the North Gate Square, for example, the teacher announces from time to time to his students, "If you screw it up, then you deserve no face. Right is right, and wrong is wrong". In those dancing groups, it is not uncommon to see the teacher so angered by his/her students' poor performance that he/she threatens to quit the teaching. For example, this account from the researcher's field notes reads:

[Location: the site for the teaching of classical Indian dance, North Gate Square]

Many of the students forgot to wear their black uniform (It seems that each student has even more than one uniform!). Also, apparently most of them failed to practice at home the piece of dance learned last week, and their performance of it today was rather poor. The bystanders began to laugh. The teacher was so angered: she turned off the music

player, took off her uniform, and got prepared to leave the dancing site. Some of the senior participants in the group came over to apologize to her but her anger was not eased. All of a sudden, she turned around to scream at the students, “I don’t care about the small money earned from you. I am not in such a want of money. But what you have shown to me is rather disappointing, and unless you can rectify your attitude in this matter, I refuse to teach you any longer.” The dancing site then subsided into thorough silence. Many spectators passed by, surprised and puzzled. The “cold war” lasted for about 20 minutes and the teacher finally compromised and re-started the teaching. (Field notes, 06 October, 2011)

To be strict, rigorous and even exacting lies as the core of the teacher’s self-identity performed at the dancing site. The subject position as a professional, competent teacher is actively lived and also communicated to the outside. Such performative moments are made sense of through the new, though temporary, social relations between the teacher and ordinary leisure participants. The teacher produces authoritative knowledge of the standard and professionally “correct” routines for dancing; and the “students”, on the other hand, are encouraged to “act right” (Anderson, 1999) according to the distinctions between right/wrong, good/bad. In these dancing sites, the students also try their best to follow the teacher’s instructions. Most of them are fairly serious about the quality of dancing that they should achieve, and they would repeatedly practice the same bodily act in order to make it look “correct”. Students are often seen correcting each other’s dancing, translating the standards established by the teacher into a series of shared rules and regulations in their lived practices and experiences.

We need to note that since public dancing is essentially defined as *leisure*, the dancing students bear *no* moral responsibility to collaborate with the teacher’s performance of a professional identity. However, the students do not turn their backs on the teacher. During my interviews many students expressed their appreciation for dancing teachers’ commitment to professional standards and decided to contribute to the teachers’ project of self-actualization. In this sense, the students not only configure their behaviours in response to the shifting social relations with the teacher (Sennett, 1977; 1994), but also give rise to a remarkable ethical moment of respect (Sennett, 2004; Watson, 2006). The public dancing site is a shared social setting in which both the teacher and the students carefully guard their respective roles in a collective social drama. The performed distinction of teacher/student is maintained through the students’ full respect to the teacher’s representation of cultural identification.

For the students as well, the achievement of high-quality dancing may be seen as a process for the exploration of personal value and potential. Public dancing, therefore, is transformed into a project of self-actualization for both the teacher and the students. Interestingly, during

the public dancing, neither the teacher nor the students show any reluctance in presenting poor-quality dancing to the bystanders and the spectators when they just begin to practice a new piece of dancing. Instead, public teaching itself is conceived of as a gradual transition from awkwardness to skilfulness, from dissatisfaction to perfection. It is exactly this transformative, “from-cocoon-to-butterfly” process that the teacher and the students are keen to present during this public drama of teaching and learning. Indeed, the introduction of teaching into public space leisure has fundamentally reshaped the symbolic contents of this everyday activity. If the culture of public space, as Richardson (1982) suggests, can be grasped from the *definition* of a particular space given by those who participate in its social and cultural construction, then the teacher’s and the students’ symbolic investment in the dancing site can be most precisely shot through their vision of these “more-than-leisure” moments in public performativity:

Perhaps for other groups, their primary purposes are relaxation and the catharsis of surplus energy. Surely we also have similar purposes but for us dancing means much more. It is a process of learning and it is also about the pursuit of art and culture. If you can present high quality dancing to yourself as well as the spectators, this experience of self-actualization is really priceless. In this group, we do not treat our activity as pure leisure or relaxation. It acts also as leisure but it goes beyond it. Aesthetics in dancing is more important in our group than in other groups, perhaps. What we focus on is the improvement of our dancing quality and dancing skills. (Interview 23082011B)

Without doubt, the presence of bystanders and spectators further motivates the teachers and students to present the “best self” (Lofland, 1973), in terms of high quality and skilfulness. Under the spectatorship of bystanders, the teachers and students need to collaborate intimately to defend both sides’ projects of self-actualization. To properly manage the impressions that this social front conveys to outsiders, both the teacher and students need to stay loyal to the respective roles that they are expected to play in this social drama. The spectators’ continual cheers for skilful dancing, their complimentary remarks to the dancers and their occasional applause always encourage the dancing teacher to keep his/her group in line with the standard routines of quality and skilfulness. Public dancing, therefore, is interpreted as a tribute that the dancers dedicate to a supportive audience. Aesthetical perfection in dancing, in this sense, is understood as a cultural value to be consumed by both the dancers and spectators as a source of happiness and entertainment.



**Figure 3-4 A dancing teacher correcting his student**

(Source: photograph by the author)

### **Scenario 2: public performing as mundane theatricality**

In People's Park and the North Gate Square, public performing and shows organized by grassroots groups are commonly seen. Unlike public teaching which is a *performative* scenario rather than *performance* proper, public shows in these sites expect the involvement of a proper audience. Roughly three types of performing groups can be identified: groups specializing in singing; groups combining singing and dancing in their shows; and groups singing Cantonese Opera, a local theatre sung in the Cantonese language. Seniors and retirees play the most active role in these groups, though the participation of young and middle-aged urbanites is far from exceptional. Most of the performers involved in these groups describe themselves as amateur enthusiasts for cultural activities who have received zero professional training, although some of the senior performers were previously regular participants in similar performances organized in their workplaces.

For grassroots public performers, the sites for performing have concretized a heterotopic social arena (Foucault, 1986; Hetherington, 1997) in which they play out enthusiasm for cultural activities as well as the desire to express and to show. In this sense public

performing can also be viewed as a collective project of self-actualization similar to the performativity of public teaching. As a result, as I have mentioned earlier, the performers are never reluctant in funding the public performing with their own financial resources. Given most performers' working-class or lower-middle-class background, public performing often imposes a notable extra cost upon their everyday budgets. But during my interviews performers reiterate from time to time their own formula for calculating the logic of money in the park and the square: the unconstrained possibilities of experience, expression and self-exploration make the economic cost an "absolutely worthy" investment. In contrast to the commodified cultural experiences inscribed with logics of profit making and passive consumption, the space of public performing is frequently described as one of participation, expression, and above all, the active creation of cultural meanings:

Entertainment is a necessary part of our everyday life. If you don't come to the park, you need to spend some small amount of money on entertainment anyway. Even sitting at home and watching TV are not totally free of cost, right? Compared to watching TV, going to cinema, or sitting at home doing nothing, I would prefer participating in this kind of performing. The biggest difference of performing from watching TV is that you are not passive, but very active: everyday part of your body needs to move in this process. Surely, it also gives you the chance to show your enthusiasm for dancing and singing. We are amateurs and we will never be qualified for the professional performances in expensive theatres. But the park is good enough for us. (Interview 30092011A)

In contrast to events of public teaching, public performing is not to be presented as a gradual, transitory process from poor quality to perfection. Instead, public performers normally aim at presenting a consistently well-prepared, high-standard show to the audience. Thus they imitate more professional performance to display their abilities and qualities. To achieve the aims of self-actualization and self-satisfaction in public performing requires devotions extending much beyond the physical realm of the park or the square. For those public performers, rehearsal is a process essential to the success of a public show. One performing group in People's Park, for example, offers a large-scale show combining singing and dancing every Friday evening; but they need to do rehearsals almost every day except the show days in one of the group members' home or a community centre. In any particular performing group, some of its members are also amateur musical instrument players; and the flavours of performance and theatricality are considerably added to by the use of sophisticated sets of musical and audio instruments, costumes and stage props. In each public performance, the musical instrument players would remain highly attentive throughout; and they would continually interact with the performers in order to guarantee the coordination between the musical rhythms and the performers' bodily motions.



Yet, the symbolic connotations of performing and performers' relations to the audience are far from one-dimensional. Performing bears profound potential for the performers to enact and consume diverse emotions, intentions and desires. To understand performance in terms of its multiple cultural and symbolic ramifications enables us to more closely scrutinize the social dynamics in public performing (Low, 2000). In the park and the square, the improvisational and unpredictable nature of everyday practices renders possible multiple and complex social relations between the performers and the spectators. On the one hand, it seems that the performers' "desire to perform" is not necessarily co-shaped by the presence of an audience. Very often, the actual scenes of performing suggest that these public shows are practiced in the presence of the audience, but not necessarily *intended* for them. Certainly, performing in the public creates opportunities for the performers to display their enthusiasm for cultural activities, their desire to express such enthusiasm, and also their competence and ability in presenting relatively high-quality shows. But in many circumstances, such experiences of performativity and expressivity seem to be largely internal to a somehow pre-established identity position, rather than mediated by the presence of the spectators. In other words, the desire to perform and to express is played out through the performers' bodily practices, but not necessarily determined by or oriented towards the presence of the spectators.

Thus in a typical scene of singing performance, the audience often seems to be located in a remote and *imagined* space, rather than directly encountered. The performer's eyesight would concentrate on the printed lyrics; and from time to time he/she looks up into the air, showing how much he/she is immersed in the performing practice. He/she would be continuously waving his/her hands and moving them in unpredictable directions, with his/her feet frequently moving around in very small paces and the torso leaning alternately towards either the left or the right side. Surely, all these bodily movements work to create an ambience of theatricality. But in the same time, one may also be surprised at how little the performer would interact with the audience. Although the audience may cheer the performer and applaud from time to time, they are never invited to participate in those performances and the remarks made by the audience are rarely responded to directly. The repertoire of performances is not specifically designed to satiate the demands of the audience. Every member in the group takes his/her turn to do a performance according to his/her own preferences, but the audience's opinions are rarely consulted directly. During my visits to the sites of public performing in Guangzhou's rainy, hot summer season, it is not unusual to see public performances afflicted with a fairly small audience or no audience at all. But never do such occasional "audience crises" substantially influence the planned routines of performing. Interestingly, despite the performers' commitment to presenting high quality shows, occasional disruptions to the

intended coherent quality are more often the rules than exceptions. But the performers seem to have a very relaxed attitude towards those small episodes of embarrassment. In a word, the audience seems *not* an indispensable component in constituting the scene of public performing.

Yet, neither People's Park nor the Square is a space which favours the exclusion or the ignorance of the audience. Hence despite the performers' inclination to self-entertaining, the audience is always a social presence that they need to constantly negotiate, either corporeally, symbolically or discursively (Watson, 2006). Similar to all theatrical settings, the presence of a supportive audience substantially enhances the performers' sense of self-actualization, which in turn motivates them to present better-quality shows to the outsiders. But what is much more notable is that, in both the park and the square the temporal social relatedness between the performers and the audience is frequently articulated as a question of care, friendship and social responsibility. For most performing groups, rural migrant workers constitute the majority of the audiences. As probably the most marginalized social group in post-reform urban China, migrant workers are frequent visitors to urban public spaces for the opportunities of low-cost or free entertainment. To some extent, migrants' concentration in urban parks and squares can be seen as a vivid manifestation of their structural marginality in the city as well as their economic inability to access commodified entertainment. Interestingly, the migrant workers' presence as audiences to public performing has motivated many performers to discursively reconstruct their social position in relation to the migrant others. In their narratives, public performing is often re-interpreted as a social relation of cultural production-consumption without the involvement of exchange value. Such narratives enable the performers to see public performing as a manifestation of their sympathy, care and friendship towards a disadvantaged social group. The performers' sympathetic stance towards the migrants' social marginality prompts them to see public performing as a means at their disposal through which they can improve the migrants' quality of life by providing opportunities of entertainment. Public performing organized by grassroots groups, therefore, is seen by many performers as a temporary, not-so-powerful, yet meaningful resistance to the unequal distribution of cultural resources in dominant social structures. During my interviews, the conceptual contour of "social responsibility" is employed from time to time by the performers to articulate the role that public performing can play in producing culturally inclusive urban space. To care about the poor, the marginal and the weak, in this sense, is conceived of as essential to being a "socially responsible" member of the society.

As a result many groups have now regularized their performing and give performances at one or two fixed times every week such that more migrant workers can follow these shows. Such regularity, certainly, requires considerable perseverance, especially for elderly performers. But in the same time, many performers insist that much of the happiness in public performing actually emerges from this altruistic spirit embedded in the social relation between the performers and the migrant workers. Also, the rhetoric of social responsibility continuously motivates the performers to reshape their performing in accordance to the moral imperative to care for the migrant others. For example, although the migrants are usually described as easygoing and not picky, the performers are keen on the continual improvement of the quality of performances so that the audience's support to the groups can be "candidly paid back". Also, the repertoire of performances often varies in each week so that the public shows may be less boring to regular spectators. More interestingly, most large-size performing groups have now formalized their organization, clarified each member's duty in planning public shows, and adopted some informal mechanisms to supervise the quality of performance. Some groups even elected their leaders. By establishing a slightly bureaucratized structure of management, as many performers have commented, the previously personal interests of self-actualization and cultural enthusiasm are finally transformed into a shared initiative of social responsibility and moral obligation:

You can see there are so many migrant workers coming to watch our shows. And not to disappoint them, you need at least some professional spirit and formal organization in this group. At least, we need to ensure that every week at this moment our group should show up in the park with several pieces of performance well rehearsed. That is our commitment to our audience. You can see that most of them are rural migrants; and except performances in the park, what other kinds of entertainment would they have? Would they spend 100 RMB for a movie in the cinema? Very rarely I guess. What we are doing also contributes to the healthiness of our society. But if you lack a strong commitment, if you perform very poorly, or you come one week but not the next, then you can't really attract the audience very well. (Interview 13092011B)



**Figure 3-5 Public performing of singing in a raining day**

(Source: photograph by the author)

### **Scenario 3: displaying difference, performing identities**

Observing the two scenarios investigated above, one may reasonably wonder whether the playfulness, the non-instrumentality of everyday leisure (Stevens, 2007) is somewhat eroded by these more *serious* dimensions such as self-actualization and social responsibility. That said, we need to note that the carnivalesque and non-purposeful festivity nonetheless persists in both the park and the square. Such group activities do not serve any specific purpose of self-actualization, and the fun and entertainment embedded in them emerge from the improvisational, unguided and centreless bodily engagements and social interactions. The participants fully engage with the organism of the bodily and the carnivalesque; and no professional knowledge administers the trajectories of bodily practices. In other words, social order in these activities emerges from improvised responses to, and negotiation with, immediate social settings and spatial experiences, rather than a shared framework of quality or standards.

To narrow down our focus, this section will investigate in some detail what I call the “carnavalesque dancing” in People’s Park and the North Gate Square. Normally, for this sort

of activities there is no formal organization; and the participants do not constitute a stable group, either. In a typical situation one or more “coordinators” will provide audio instruments and get permission from the Park’s or the Square’s managerial authority to establish a particular “dancing ground”. The participants are not listed as formal group members and they bear no responsibility to attend such activities regularly. Each time when participants visit the dancing ground, they may be subject to a 0.5 RMB payment per person to cover the cost of audio instruments and electricity. Otherwise the participants can choose to offer the coordinators a fixed monthly payment (normally at 8-10 RMB), so that they can attend the dancing at any time. Due to the low cost of participation, many visitors to these dancing places are rural migrant workers, while less affluent Guangzhou locals also participate frequently. In a few dancing places the coordinators are generous enough not to charge the participants any payment at all. A telling characteristic of all these carnivalesque dancing grounds is the absence of a privileged social role designated to a professional/semi-professional teacher. Neither is there any shared commitment to quality or standards amongst the participants. Thus in these social events, human energies and human desires are released in multiple and unpredictable directions. Also, the identity position experienced and performed disobeys, or even subverts, the normative hierarchies of good/bad, high-quality/low-quality.

In a sharp contrast to the somehow disciplined bodily motions in the events of public teaching and public performing, carnivalesque dancing is full of unpredictable and creative appropriations of bodily expressions. In four of these dancing grounds, for example, the carnivalesque dancing is based on some professional dancing styles such as ballroom dance or Latin dance, and the participants dance in pairs. But normally the participants are familiar with only some fairly basic ways of orienting steps in such dances. So very often they need to creatively appropriate their bodily agency, negotiate the musical rhythms and develop improvised choreography in order to fulfil a complex piece of dancing. The dancers also improvise a diversity of bodily motions and randomly insert these cameos into the established routines of professional dancing styles. As a result any specific piece of dancing presented in those dancing grounds is saturated with improvisational creativity; and those unruly choreographies of dancing are hardly repeatable in a next dancing session. Contrary to the unity and concerted socio-spatial order observed in group dancing under the guidance of a teacher, carnivalesque dancing is filled with fragmentation, incoherence and messiness. To any particular piece of backdrop music, different pairs may dance with radically distinct combinations and sequences of bodily motions. If it comes to a more fast-paced and lively piece of music, the situation would be even messier and many pairs abandon the

conventional routines of professional dancing style altogether and totally break into unruly improvisations of bodily acts.

This is not to say that the notion of quality or aesthetics is totally irrelevant in these sites of carnivalesque dancing. Often it can be observed that dancing participants correct each other's bodily motions in order to negotiate a shared aesthetics in their dancing. But such a negotiated aesthetics is never secured by entrenched superiority or authority, but always fluid, unstable and endlessly subverted by new configurations of spatial practices. Also, sometimes one dancer may act as a temporary teacher, circulating his/her specific understandings of quality or aesthetics to other participants. But in the meantime he/she is simply an ordinary participant and his/her style is never taken as the standard or the orthodox. In such dancing events, all the participants share equal chances to become the temporary focus of the group, and anyone whose bodily practice is deemed good and attractive can become a popular hero through participants' mutual appreciation. For example, in the People's Park several young men have introduced elements in street dance into the relatively rigid routines of ballroom dance and Latin dance, and thus their dancing practices frequently becomes the centres of showcase and bodily expression.

At the centre of this carnivalesque performance of identity is the dancers' discursive resistance to the normative hierarchies of good/bad, high-quality/low-quality, coupled with their aspiration to present an "authentic identity" unconstrained by mainstream frameworks for judging personal value and merit. On the other hand, the dancers also interpret the carnivalesque dancing as grassroots social members' escape from the colonization of everyday life by established routines and norms. Especially for those migrant workers who are subject to the alienating forces in China's booming manufacturing industries, the carnivalesque dancing is seen as a precious chance for them to escape dominant social relations and "do something not for making a living, not for competing with others and not for any particular purpose" (Interview 24082011A). For them, the space of carnivalesque dancing seems to be an insignificant *nowhere* in their everyday life, bearing no power in transforming their social status or positions in the social structures. But it is simultaneously a meaningful *somewhere*, temporarily reversing the dominant values of social life and providing a space for transgressiveness and indulgence. Interestingly, many participants in the carnivalesque dancing make reference to their "low social status" to justify their indifference to the normative boundaries of good/bad, high-quality/low-quality: since they do not belong to the "highly respected" part in the society, they would not have much face to lose. As a result the gaze from the passing-by spectators bears little significance in shaping the dancers' display of their cultural orientations:

If I were the only one in this dancing place, perhaps I would feel embarrassed and be keen to withdraw from other people's gaze. But there are so many people anyway, and my attitude towards dancing and pleasure is shared by a lot of people. So I never feel shamed because my dancing is not professional or of very high quality. I don't care about how other people think about me: perhaps they think that my dancing is so poorly presented, and I am sure some really do think so. But what can I lose? Will I be in newspaper headlines tomorrow? No. So it does not affect my happiness because I have my own group here. (Interview 02092011B)

Certainly, the undisciplined, indulgent festivity of carnivalesque dancing does not exist in isolation. Rather, it is inevitably enmeshed in the symbolic ecologies in the park and the square. Very often, it acts as the *constitutive outside* of those cultural identifications which insist on the commitment to high-quality performance in the everyday leisure. For those practitioners of high-quality activities, a sense of cultural and moral superiority is often constructed by establishing such discursive boundaries between good performance and bad performance, high quality and low quality. Unsurprisingly, there is a considerable overlap between groups with a professional/semi-professional teacher and groups committed to the normative definitions of quality and standards; and the teacher, very often, plays the quintessential role in instilling the notion that cultural superiority can be measured only by higher qualities in the practice of leisure activities.

Such groups, as this chapter discussed above, are normally well equipped with uniforms, props and audio instruments and practice one or more professional dancing styles. The practice of leisure, in the same time, is also subject to a shared framework regulating the flows of bodily motions. However, it is also essential to note that such a framework of quality and standard is not imposed via hegemonic authority. Rather, it is actively lived and practiced, and helps its adherents to re-construct understandings of their cultural identifications. Performative displays in public leisure do not present pre-established identity positions; on the contrary, they *create* symbolic meanings of different styles of practice and delineate discursive boundaries between us and others (Watson, 2006). In People's Park and North Gate Square, the performed divisions of high quality/low quality, good performance/bad performance play the configurative and productive role in redrawing the lines of identities and cultural difference. Such lines of difference are crosscut by the public leisure participants' more established class identities and social status; but even these pre-established identity categories are not bounded in essential ontological meanings, but rendered concrete and intelligible through situated presentations and representations.

Thus amongst the groups committed to high quality performances, it is frequently reiterated that only those who are less educated and culturally less cultivated, especially the

rural migrant workers, would participate in carnivalesque dancing. During my interviews, those committed to high-quality practices reaffirm from time to time their identities as “city people” and “people who are trained with certain cultural sensitivity”. High-quality performances are often described in terms of the practitioners’ high personal qualities, better education and sophisticated cultural tastes. Such performances are interpreted as “culture” which combines fun and entertainment with more serious dimensions of learning, self-actualization and aesthetic perfection, while carnivalesque dancing is viewed as merely unsophisticated relaxation. More interestingly, many participants in high-quality practices suggest that even if those without high personal quality participate in their activities, they would not be able to integrate themselves into the “culturally dense ambience” of these groups. In these groups, it is not uncommon to hear about anecdotes of migrant workers’ quitting high-cultural activities after one or two weeks’ “tentative participation”. Such anecdotal accounts, true or not, further consolidate the symbolic boundaries between us and others, and help the participants to come in terms of the imagined cultural distinctiveness of their particular groups.

Understandably, the thinly veiled issue of class identity lurks from time to time beneath such narratives of cultural distinction. Without explicit discrimination against members from any particular social stratum, a generally accepted rhetoric amongst the participants in high quality practices confirms the “natural” associations between one’s class identity, personal quality and cultural taste. In the North Gate Square the group for *kung fu* training is probably the only one in the two fieldwork sites in which middle-class participants constitute the majority. Mr B, the teacher in charge of this group, manages carefully the class homogeneity in his group in order not to recruit too many working class participants, in particular rural migrant workers. One of the techniques of exclusion, unsurprisingly, is the unusually high payment charged to the participants. In his narratives, *kung fu* is described as a traditional cultural legacy whose appreciation entails high education and particular cultural sophistication; people from lower social classes, on the other hand, are seen as generally lacking in such cultural tastes as well as the ability to practice high-end culture. Again, the migrant workers are represented as the very stereotype of low-class, uneducated social members who are not worthy to be involved in this particular group. During my interview with him, Mr B is never reluctant in explicitly boasting the “higher class composition” of the participants in his group:

My group is attractive mainly to those who are more educated and more affluent in income, especially the intellectuals and white-collars. To take *kung fu* as your leisure activity you need to have some ability to appreciate it as a traditional culture, rather than



simply bodily motions, and study the philosophies and deep meanings intrinsic to it. The rural migrants, they are still struggling every day for their basic livelihoods and they do not have the mentality to appreciate this deep culture. In my group, most of the participants are white-collar professionals and many of them are university professors. (Interview 22092011A)



**Figure 3-6 Carnavalesque dancing in People's Park**

(Source: photograph by the author)

## Conclusion

None of this is to suggest that what one finds in terms of cultural activities in Shanghai are precisely like the performances one will find in Central Park, or on the public plazas of Barcelona, or in Hyde Park in London. They are not. They are different. They represent the unique and special cultural legacies of the Chinese past, refreshed and performed by people who wish to keep alive their own collective identities. Doing so appears to be very important to the local inhabitants, something that must be done in public, to affirm who they are to themselves as well as to those who view them. Public space in Shanghai, in other words, is a place not only to meet and talk, but also to enact cultural scripts that help to keep alive what it means to be Chinese today.

(Orum *et al.*, 2009, p. 388)

The aim of this chapter has been to investigate the multiple, complex ways in which meanings are presented through everyday spatial practices, and how heterogeneous cultural

identifications are reconstructed and performed corporeally, symbolically and discursively. With a case study of everyday public leisure in Guangzhou, this chapter echoes well Orum *et al.*'s (2009) observation in Shanghai that public man is alive and well. As I have argued, the public man is an active agent capable of orienting behaviours, producing symbolic meanings and negotiating self-identifications by mixing with other social members. However, there is no unitary cultural meaning and symbolic contents associated with this notion of public man. Although Orum *et al.*'s (2009) study in China has revealed a remarkable diversity in ordinary urbanites' everyday practices, there is still a need to further deconstruct this image of public man in detail through closer scrutiny of both the performative presentations and discursive constructions of cultural identities. At the centre of this enquiry are the ways in which ordinary people devote their resources, labour and human energy to keep alive their individual or collective identities and the reasons why such activities appear to be so important to them. In People's Park and the North Gate Square, cultural identities performed and experienced through mundane spatial practices are decentred and fragmented, operating alongside both more established social categories and diverse configurations of temporary social relations (Simpson, 2008). Thus in public space leisure, marginalized dancing teachers find a spatial anchor for their identity as both a teacher and a dancing professional; public performers negotiate their understanding of social responsibility as well as an intrinsic desire to express and to perform; carnivalesque dancers subvert the conventional hierarchies of good/bad, high/low, while adherents to high-quality performance negotiate their cultural identification in a symbolic ecology with the "less educated, less qualified" others.

On the other hand, given that China has long been labelled a civilization of "collective culture", it might be a productive vantage point to understand public leisure as the continuation of Chinese cultural legacies. In the same time, however, it might be equally important to note that the immediate social, cultural and economic contexts of post-reform urban China have at least co-shaped and co-produced the ways in which ordinary people understand and perform their cultural identities. The limited degree of political liberalization created the macroscopic political conditions for the revival of public space activities. More importantly, at a more microscopic level it seems to be the intensifying commodification of popular culture in urban China that goes parallel to the emergence of the grassroots leisure class in public space. By staging leisure activities in public sites which stay largely outside the overwhelming forces of the post-reform Chinese modernity, ordinary urbanites response to the economic exclusion of commodified cultural institution by creating opportunities of cheap, grassroots entertainment. In the meantime, they also creatively resist the ascendancy of passive cultural consumption by consolidating a space of extensive participation and

bodily engagements. The emergence of rural migrant workers as a culturally distinct social group in post-reform China, as the empirical analysis has shown, also plays a noticeable role in constituting cultural identities in the public.

Through some detailed investigations of the performative moments in public space leisure, this chapter has attempted to reveal that ordinary participants' reconstruction of self-identities and the configuration of shifting social relations are essential to understanding public space leisure as the assemblage of complex symbolic domains. The numerous logics underlying the production of cultural meanings extend much beyond killing time and relaxation. As this chapter argued earlier, life in the public realm is an intrinsically cultural and sociological question: each seemingly unconscious act or bodily motion may bear symbolic meanings to both oneself and the other. Cultural meanings and identities are not simply transported to particular spaces, but constantly reproduced and re-negotiated. Analyses in this chapter have focused on four interrelated domains which have co-constituted the cultural fabric in public social life: everyday behaviours and bodily practices as well as the rhythms emergent from them (Lefebvre, 2008; Simpson, 2008); spatialized symbolic meanings (Low, 2000); performed cultural identities and cultural differences (Watson, 2006); and the temporary social relations immanent to spatial practices (Simpson, 2008). In People's Park and the North Gate Square, it is apparent that for each participant there is a temporary, performatively engaged social role which he/she would loyally observe. Such performed social roles enable public leisure participants to construct and experience contingent, unessential identity positions through bodily practices, symbolic ecologies and discursive productions. Each participant's social role is carefully defended and respected by others in intensive social interactions. Public space in China is far more than a place to meet and talk. It is employed by everyday urbanites to weave complex webs of intersecting cultural meanings, speaking back to the established social categories and social structures, and create new possibilities of social connectedness and social relations.

## **Chapter 4    Closeted heterotopia: public space, gay sexuality and self-disciplining subject in People's Park**

### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the relationships between urban public spaces, gay men's cruising, and the constitution of homosexual subjectivities. Again, People's Park is chosen as the spatial setting for the case study. The importance of public cruising spaces in organizing both homo-social and homoerotic relations between gay men has been recognized in various works (e.g. Leap, 1999). Ever since Humphrey's (1970) groundbreaking ethnography on tearoom trade, public spaces for gay cruising have been seen as crucial sites in which vernacular sexual knowledge is produced and a collective gay identity is formulated (Iveson, 2007; Turner, 2003; Brown, 2008). More importantly, public cruising places create constitutive and transformative possibilities for the production of particular gay subjectivities. Cruising places are not only spaces in which normative sexual geographies can be subverted temporarily, but also urban locations where the regulatory power of the state and the society has always-already been established. As Leap (1997) argues, these complex intersections of sexual visibility, spatial politics and regulation unfold in the lives of gay cruisers and also shape their collective sexual experiences and gendered identities. In this sense, an understanding of public cruising space requires analytical energy dedicated to the productive relationships between space, power relations and the constitution of sexual subjectivities (Brickell, 2010).

In Chapter 2, I have argued that in a large number of extant studies one important criterion for distinguishing good or progressive public spaces from bad or reactionary ones is the degree of inclusiveness: the inclusion or presence of particular social groups into public spaces is unproblematically read as the manifestation of social tolerance or resistance. What is neglected in such a simplistic dichotomization is twofold. First, since every space is encoded ideologically, even urban spaces which can be named as socially inclusive are featured by constant production, destabilization and reproduction of norms and boundaries. Second, the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion also fails to take into account the diverse subject positions ordinary people may adopt in negotiating regimes of regulation and norms. As a result, the oppression of specific social groups is understood simply in terms of the enclosure or regulation of spaces, instead of fine-grained webs of social interactions and practices.

This chapter follows this critique of binary oppositions between inclusion and exclusion, presence and absence, progressive space/reactionary space. At an empirical level, it reports how public cruising place can be mobilized as a space of alternative socio-spatial ordering and *simultaneously* a closeted space for gay cruisers to re-assert the dominant public/private divide and hetero-normativity. It discusses how gay men attempt to reconcile a gay subject in public space with the established boundaries between deviancy and normalcy, private and public through the discursive and embodied practices of self-disciplining. In doing so, it argues that while queered public space occupied by sexual minorities counters the erasure, the concealment of the closet, it can be simultaneously shaped by the dominant, hetero-normative ways of socio-spatial ordering. This argument echoes a post-structural approach towards the complex spatialities of closeting and coming-out (Fuss, 1991; Butler, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990; Probyn, 1996), and conceptualizes sexualized public space as a hybridized space in which hetero-normativity can be contested, but simultaneously re-inscribed. This chapter attempts to grasp the complex, competing forces and subject positions in the construction of a recently emerged urban social space in China, in order to illustrate the ways in which sexual subjectivity is rendered relational and unstable within a network of social relations, cultural institutions and power.

### **Inside/outside hetero-normativity: public space and sexual subjectivity**

The public/private divide in sexual norms is inscribed in the cultural and discursive construction of both public and private spaces. The idea that certain sexual identities are deviant and should be kept away from visibility in public space has enormously powerful effects in structuring the normative geographies of spatial practices (Bondi, 1998). As Valentine (1996) has pointed out, public spaces are often assumed to be naturally or authentically heterosexual (p. 145). Heterosexual codes of conducts are powerfully inscribed in the established norms and rules of public spaces; and spaces of sexual dissidents are thus relegated to the sphere of the private (Valentine, 1993a). This hegemonic performance of sexual-spatial normality prescribes what can be counted as the “acceptable” or “appropriate” conducts in everyday public spaces; and those who disrupt this totalizing structure of normality may face strict regulations (Johnson, 2007).

Existing literature has provided ample empirical evidence of the spatial processes through which public spaces are policed and disciplined to ensure that hegemonic heterosexual norms can be solidified via spatial configurations (Jeyasingham, 2010; Valentine, 1999a; 1993b; Browne, 2007c; Brickell, 2000). This naturalization of heterosexuality in public

space constitutes one important element of what is called hetero-normativity, an aggregate of norms and rules which are deeply embedded in a wide range of social institutions and our standard accounts of the world (Warner, 1993).

In this sense, as Bell and Binnie (2000) contend, contesting the confinement of the private to enter a public arena of sexual visibility is pivotal for sexual minorities' empowerment and resistance. Although the spatial differentiation of public space from private space may not be neatly mapped onto the divide between private and public spheres (see Staeheli, 1996; Duncan, 1996), many studies have celebrated emancipatory potentials held in public spaces for bringing increased visibility for sexual minorities (Valentine, 1996; Mulligan, 2008; Marston, 2002; O'Reilly and Crutcher, 2006). Such queered and sexualized urban public spaces can be roughly categorized into two types. The first type includes urban sites which are occupied and actively appropriated by sexual minorities for both sociality and sexual eroticism (Hubbard, 2002). The gathering of members of sexual minorities can rewrite the dominant sexual geographies of particular urban spaces and therefore challenge their established cultural meanings. Spaces of the second type, on the other hand, are produced by transgressive performance of dissident sexual and gender identities. Deviant and creative performances disrupts normative dichotomies of private/public, homosexual/heterosexual, and renders the articulation of sexual identities highly fluid (Bell *et al.*, 1994). Drag in public space, gay pride parades, carnivalesque celebrations of dissident sexual identities, and exaggerated display of masculinity and femininity are all forms of inventive, subversive performances which have been documented in existing studies (Valentine, 1995; Bell and Valentine, 1995a; 1995b; Johnston, 2005; Brown, 2004; Bell *et al.*, 1994; Berlant, 1997; Binnie, 1997).

Relatively less attention, however, has been paid to the diversity of sexual minorities' experiences in public space, in particular those experiences and subjectivities outside the accounts of emancipation and resistance. The complexity in the meanings of sexualized public spaces mirrors a problem underlying the emancipatory tone reviewed above, namely the ignorance of the multiple ways in which queer and sexual identities are rendered unstable through complex negotiations with dominant cultural norms and relations of power. The presence of dominant heterosexuality always shapes non-mainstream sexual subjectivity; and this subjectivity may not always imply resistance and transgression. Do the subtle, largely inconspicuous strategies employed by gays and lesbians in public space to articulate a queer presence transgress established norms and boundaries (e.g. Valentine, 1996), or simply reinscribe the dominant hetero-normativity? There is no unidirectional answer to this question. Uncritically celebrating the emancipatory potential of public space may presuppose a

confrontational politics between sexual minorities and hegemonic sexual norms, but neglect that non-mainstream sexual subjectivity can at the same time be shaped, at least partly, by hetero-normative identifications, intentions and positionalities. Minority sexualities in the public can be co-produced by a resistant political consciousness and simultaneously the negotiation with, or even compromise to orders, rules and norms prescribed by heterosexuality. In examining the constitution of sexual minorities' subjectivity in concrete social and cultural settings there is often a need to understand the multiple ways in which heterosexual otherness is encountered by a non-mainstream sexual self in face-to-face engagement. The constitution of the self is imbricated in the web of connections, relations and encounters into which any social subject is always-already woven (Barnett, 2004; 2005). With such an analytical logic, the heterosexual other should not be seen as a pre-given and abstract backdrop against which sexual minorities' identity politics stages itself, but a concrete social and cultural reality which marginal sexual subjects actively negotiates.

In a series of commentaries on Bell *et al*'s (1994) now classic article on gender performativity, Walker (1995), Kirby (1995) and Probyn (1995) all questioned a presupposed political radicalism in gender performers and an exaggerated fluidity in gender and sexual identity. Probyn (1995) and Walker (1995) remind of the necessity to recognize that the conditions of gendered or sexed space can be historically, materially and strategically different. Hence we need to consider how people are constrained by the very regulatory norms of gender identity which are also the condition of resistance and recognize that many people with non-mainstream sexual identities continue to experience confinement and oppression. Knopp (1995) warns against the danger that complexities in the evolution of gay cultures and identities may be oversimplified and essentialized, thus foreclosing a contextualized analysis of sexual minorities. Kirby (1995) also argues that certain strategies in gender performativity do little to subvert the heterosexual discourses and an analytical emphasis on the visual display of sexual exoticism can render the discussion on identity politics formless and alienated.

Although this line of arguments concerns the particular theme of gender performativity, it speaks much to the analysis of queered and sexualized public space. It indicates that we cannot assume an *a priori* political transgressiveness in dialectics between space and non-mainstream sexual identities. Political meanings of queered public space are always socially mediated and contextually produced. Several studies on the public geographies of sexuality have made gesture to the contradictory and ambiguous meanings of sexualized or queered public spaces (Bell and Valentine, 1995a; Johnston, 2005; 2007; Browne, 2007a; 2007b; Hubbard, 2001; Enguix, 2009; Waitt, 2003; 2005; 2006). For example, Lynda Johnston's

(2005; 2007) inspiring studies on gay parades in different contexts document that a resistant consciousness and a sense of shame can coexist in the public display of homosexual pride. More intriguingly, she also discusses how some gay organizations attempt to construct a “normal” and hygienic gay identity by excluding certain “deviant” and “abnormal” gay expressions (see also Enguix, 2009). By highlighting self-disciplining and self-control, Johnston (2005) argues, certain gay cultural orientations tend to disturb the intended transgressiveness of gay public geography. Waitt’s (2003; 2005) discussion on Sydney’s Gay Games also suggests that by carefully forging an eroticized, yet non-threatening gay imagery, gay men’s political potential of transgressing hetero-normativity seems to be significantly compromised.

A tentative conclusion which can be drawn from those arguments is that spaces of gays, lesbians or other sexual minorities do not necessarily transgress dominant socio-spatial norms. Any queered or sexualized space, in this sense, is the product of struggles between competing meanings and subject positions (Oswin, 2008; Nash, 2006). The cultural and political meanings of such spaces, therefore, always sit at the intersections of transgressive creativity and other processes of disciplining, negotiation or even compromise. In this formulation, social encounters between a dissident sexual self and a “mainstream” other are concrete historical events which do not privilege any singular, disembodied and authoritative voice. The political potentials of such spaces, in this sense, cannot be taken for granted, but require nuanced analysis of the variegated discursive practices and processes of subject formation.

Such an analytical approach concentrates on the ways in which subjectivity is produced relationally, intertwining both the non-mainstream self and the dominant other. Any sexual identity performs subject positions as unfixed and fluid, but does not necessarily extend them beyond the normative. It does not always transcend categories or boundaries, but often works within the confines and constraints of dominant norms and relations of power (Oswin, 2008; Probyn, 2003). The way in which we understand the boundary between the normal and the abnormal is negotiated through practices often constrained by established social and cultural institutions – “subjectivity is a process that is continually in play with ‘reality’ and ‘ideology’, dominant representations and our own self-representations” (Probyn, 2003, p. 294). As Bell and Valentine (1995b) have persuasively pointed out, subject positions available to those people with dissident sexual identities are in part the product of the regulatory regimes which constrain the articulation of sexual identities. The tension between resistance and conformity unfolds in different ways at different times and in different places.



So overall, this chapter argues that sexual minorities' subjectivity in public space can be outside, but simultaneously inside, hetero-normativity. It also proposes that the social construction of *heterosexuality* depends, at least in part, on how homosexuality and other non-hegemonic sexual identities are socially practiced and discursively configured in space. As Fuss (1991) argues, any identity is founded relationally and it is often homosexuality which delimits the boundary of the conception of heterosexuality. Socially produced categories of homosexuality and other non-mainstream sexual identities project back onto the question of what can be counted as mainstream or normal. So coming out is simultaneously a closeting. Most sexual dissidents are both inside and outside the dominant discourses of heterosexuality at the same time – “being ‘out’ is always depends to some extent on being ‘in’” (Butler, 1991, p. 16).

Therefore it is possible for us to investigate how public space, despite all its transgressive potentials, can also be a site of closeting which may re-inscribe the power structure it simultaneously struggles with (Butler, 1991). Visibility can paradoxically lead to other forms of concealment, erasure, oppression or denial (Brown, 1997; 2011), often in quite subtle ways. No sexual identity is circumscribed in itself. The dominant heterosexuality is always a referent when sexual minorities explore their own sexual subjectivities. Heterosexual normality can be understood only by inventing the meanings of a corresponding category of homosexuality. As a result, no dissident sexual subject can be “out” completely; and it is possible for any non-mainstream sexual subject to be inside and outside the closet at the same time (Brown, 1996). Closet, therefore, is the product of social interactions and complex constellations of power/knowledge. As Brown (2000) shows, gay men who appropriate urban spaces produce both visibility and invisibility in reaction to hetero-normative structures. Chauncey's (1995) study on the gay spaces in New York confirmed that although gay men created highly visible gay spaces which transgressed certain socio-spatial orders, they also adopted various practices and strategies to negotiate the hegemonic binaries in gender and sexuality, as well as the divide of normal/abnormal<sup>7</sup>. So the making of a closet involves a whole set of social and discursive practices mediated by the working of cultural institutions and power/knowledge, and it happens in both private and public spaces.

On the other hand, to bring into highlight the domain of social relations in examining the production of sexualized or queered public spaces also demands us to understand how subjectivity is produced in relation to otherness and outsiders. How individuals' subject

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<sup>7</sup> What is most intriguing in Chauncey's *Gay New York* is his detailed depictions of how gay men themselves invented terms and cultural meanings to negotiate with their “deviant” sexual orientation and desire: for example, working class fairies who evoked a notion of effeminacy of gay men in order to justify their sexual encounters/deals with self-defined heterosexual men; also, middle class gay men who attempted to re-enact an identity of masculinity in the struggles of both gender and sexuality.

positions are shaped by the movement into the public often depends on how the relations to the other are understood, imagined and discursively practiced. In one sense, it resonates with Probyn's (1996) contention that subjectivities and identities are always configured in the domain of the social, always performed within a proximity to each other. It is a field of connections and encounters which also incorporates the relations of power and thus has enormous implications for the disciplining and governance of social subjects. In this vein, we can examine the ways in which sexuality is represented, understood and ordered at a social surface and in which the "outside" beyond the private closet can be both a liberatory space and the site of oppression.

## **Methods**

The study in this chapter is the product of an ethnography-based fieldwork conducted from August, 2011 to January, 2012. During that period, I worked as an HIV/AIDS-prevention volunteer in the cruising space in People's Park, and developed good social networks with the gay cruisers there. The fieldwork was also supported and assisted by Chi Heng Foundation, a local NGO working on homosexuality issues and HIV/AIDS prevention. Intensive, non-participant observational work was carried out in the cruising site. Observational experiences and findings were recorded in detail in the fieldwork notes. All the fieldwork notes were recorded in a narrative-based style. Further to the observational work, 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and a number of informal interviews were conducted with gay cruisers and local NGO leaders. The in-depth interviews were designed to collect subjective and discursive materials, and most of the questions in the interviews concerned how gay men position their sexual subjectivity in relation to space and the self-other ecology in the park. Discursive data collected in the field are analyzed through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach.

## **Discourses of cruising utopia and the making of collective gay culture**

### **Contextualizing homosexual identity in China**

Homosexual and gay identities in China are distinct from their counterparts in post-Stonewall North America and Europe, in both symbolic contents and political ramifications. Therefore it is necessary to frame the context around which narratives in this chapter can be articulated. This context is embedded in China's political and economic reform since 1978. In Maoist China, homosexual desire was heavily criminalized by the Communist state as a

manifestation of “capitalist degeneracy”, and thus thoroughly oppressed and regulated. It is only recently, with a limited liberalization in the political domain and the transition towards a market-based economy, that a recognized homosexual identity began to surface as an axis around which a collective subculture can be articulated (Ho, 2010). Meanwhile, in the particular context of economic neoliberalization and intensifying social polarization, the dimension of class is intrinsically woven into the negotiation of homosexual identity; and an emerging group of middle class gay and lesbians, unsurprisingly, plays the central role in producing the predominant homosexual cultures and identifications.

Several aspects of this context deserve highlighting here. First, there is no direct cultural referent for a coherently demarcated contemporary identity for homosexual people in modern China, despite this country’s rich tradition of male homo-sociality and homoeroticism. Instead, as Ho (2010) and Rofel (2007) have pointed out, homosexual identity formation in modern China finds much of its resource from incomplete and fragmentary knowledge of Western gayness. Therefore for homosexual Chinese, the understandings of their sexual identity are at best fragmented and ambiguous (Li *et al.*, 2010).

Second, discourses of national identity and cultural authenticity are deeply rooted in the framing of a Chinese homosexual identity. Homosexual people in China tend to shun a “Western-style”, confrontational identity activism. The cultural affinity to Chinese tradition and the pursuit of harmonious coexistence with the mainstream heterosexual society have profoundly shaped a shared cultural orientation for many Chinese homosexuals (Rofel, 2007; 1999; Ho, 2010).

Third, homosexual community in China is highly divided across the lines of class, social status and home region. Rural or lower-class homosexuals are often categorized as undesirable others and excluded from more powerful gay groups (Wei, 2007; Ho, 2010; Rofel, 1999). As Jones (2007) argues, Chinese homosexual communities have actively absorbed the state-led ideology of civility and personal quality into the articulation of a modern Chinese gayness. Personal quality, therefore, has become a pivotal yardstick for distinguishing good, worthy homosexuals from lower-class or rural gays.

Finally, the divisions alongside class and social status have been projected onto the cultural representations of particular queer spaces. Interestingly, public cruising places in China such as parks and streets are continuously stigmatized by middle-class homosexual communities (Li, 1998; Wei, 2007, Ho, 2010). The cultural stereotypes and meanings associated with public cruising, as this chapter will discuss in the empirical section, have significant bearings in the discursive construction of those sexualized public spaces.

## **Why People's Park?**

As the previous chapter has introduced, the popularity of People's Park owes largely to its location in the centre of Guangzhou's old town area. In 1998 the walls surrounding the park were demolished by the Guangzhou Municipal Government and the entrance fee revoked. Soon after that, gay men began to gather in the park for socializing with each other and cruising for sexual encounters. According to local NGOs, the gay space in People's Park is the largest public gay cruising ground in South China. The locational advantage of the park fostered the queering of the space. Located in the very centre of Guangzhou's old town, the park is connected conveniently to other parts of the city via public transport. Its status as a well-known urban landmark which is easy to locate and recognize contributed to its queering. Besides, the physical environment in the park is also deemed favourable. Covered largely with bushes, trees and grasslands, the park provides its users with a certain proximity to the nature. Two public lavatories in the park can also be used by the gay men as venues of casual sex.

Free entrance to the park is also highlighted by gay cruisers. Gay cruising in People's Park demonstrates a recognizable class dimension. Most of gay cruisers are less educated and members from lower social classes. Amongst my interviewees, only three hold college degrees and most of them are migrant workers from neighbouring provinces such as Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan and Guangxi. As a result, those cruisers seem to be sensitive to the economic costs of cruising and an urban park whose entrance is free of charge is seen as an ideal cruising ground. Gay cruisers in People's Park also suggest that local middle class gay men tend to shun public cruising places. In the narratives of those wealthier and "more decent" urban gay men, People's Park is generally interpreted as a site of sexual degeneracy and promiscuousness. In addition, being in a public cruising place also means increased visibility and danger of exposing one's sexual identity. As a result, the presence of middle class gay men in People's Park is rare:

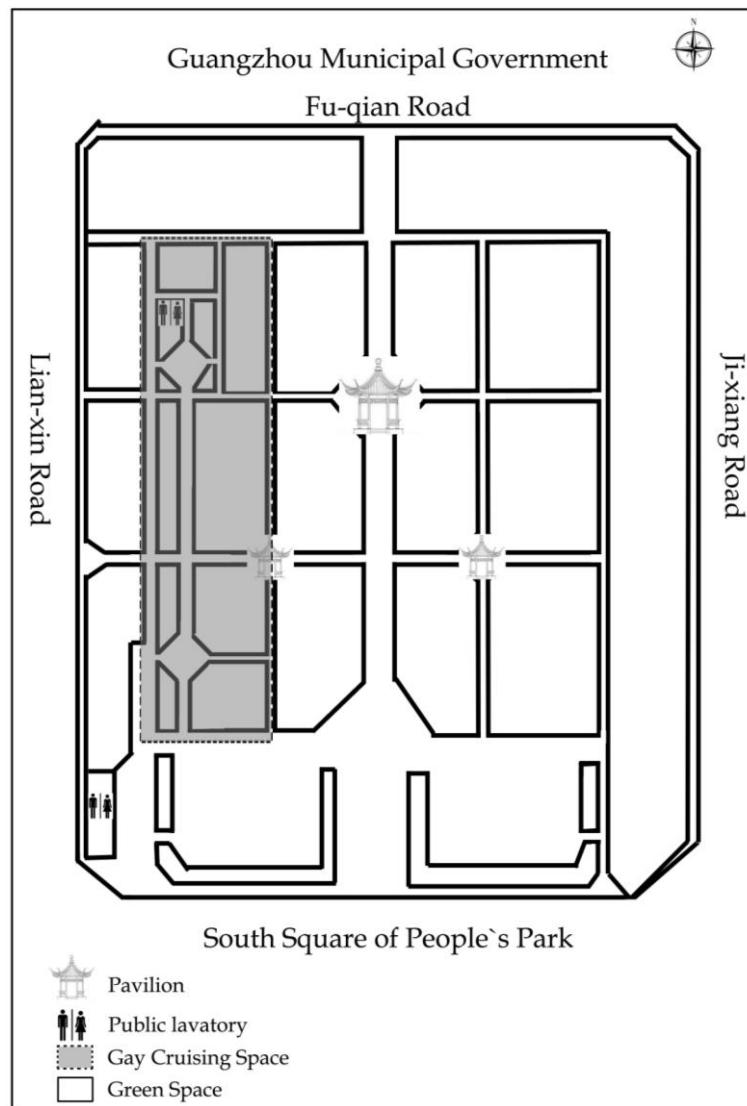
I don't like bars, saunas or gay clubs. You need to spend money in those places, and for people like us, it is not quite realistic. But those gay men who are wealthier tend to go to those sites. You know, they can afford consuming those places. Anyway, decent people need decent places. (Interview 191011A)

As we can see from this quote, for local middle class gay men a homosexual subject seems to be incorporated into a consumer identity through a higher degree of economic capital. Therefore, the free-of-charge and "low-status" cruising site in People's Park is a distinct space even within the local gay community. But for the gay cruisers who have actually dared to "go public", People's Park is exalted as a crucial site for both homo-sociality and erotic

sexual experiences. In the gay cruisers' narratives the park is called a "fishing ground", a place for fleeting relationships and opportunities of instant sex. The process of partner-hunting is fulfilled, and somehow ritualized through the production and circulation of vernacular sex codes (Iveson, 2007) – the acts like bench sitting, walking and eye contacting are all charged with particular cultural meanings:

As a form of counterpublic address, beat-cruising is shaped by the problem of constructing a scene of circulation which can survive in a hostile context...Of course, negotiating, negotiating the opportunities and constraints of beats for sexual contact is a very delicate procedure... Here the 'problem' of establishing a counterpublic horizon is reincorporated into the affective dimensions of the form of public address itself – a part of the experience of participating in a counterpublic which is savoured and shared... (ibid, p. 87)

Homo-sociality in the form of chatting with other gay men, rendezvousing with partners, making and meeting friends is another important element in the production of a public homosexual culture. The gay cruising place occupies roughly one-thirds of the entire space in the park. This space is dubbed the "gay belt" by the gay cruisers. The bulk of the cruising space is comprised of three long, parallel pathways with stone benches at both sides. Two public lavatories located at both ends of the so-called "gay belt" are heavily used for the gay men for casual sexual encounters. The rest of the park is used for everyday leisure activities by ordinary park visitors, like many other urban parks in China. This socio-spatial ecology turns the "gay belt" into a geographically distinct, yet unenclosed borderland (Waitt, 2006) – although there is a loosely territorialized "gay space", the gay men's cruising activities are exposed constantly to the gazes of the heterosexual outsiders.



**Figure 4-1 The layout of People's Park and the location of the gay cruising space**

### **People's Park as site of emancipation**

Similar to its Western counterparts, public space in China is also coded with hegemonic heterosexuality. Even in private spaces, homosexual desire can only be spoken out normally in the absence of heterosexual others. So the public visibility of homosexuality in a renowned urban park has indeed challenged certain taken-for-granted assumptions about the normative socio-spatial ordering of sexuality. The cruising space is regarded by gay men in the park as an escape from the everyday oppression under the hetero-normative ways of living. During my interviews, it is not unusual to hear gay cruisers interpreting the park as a cruising utopia with a temporary suspension of dominant sexual norms. The gay men attempt

to carve out in the park a space in which they can articulate both homosexual identity and erotic desire. As Chauncey (1993) points out, for sexual minorities who experience cultural oppression in everyday spaces of home, work and leisure, private desire can be expressed only in public places, since public space often permits anonymity and a spatial concentration of sexual dissidents. For many gay men in People's Park, everyday spaces of work and family are often codified with heterosexual norms. The class status of the gay cruisers seems to mean that they suffer from an even more overwhelming hetero-normative cultural environment than middle class gays. Most of them have not come out to their parents or friends. Many of them are even in heterosexual marriages. For many gay cruisers from rural areas, family is a particularly oppressive space dominated by traditional Chinese moral values highlighting marriage and child-raising.

But the cruising ground in People's Park undermines and subverts the hegemonic everyday geographies of sexual norms and consolidates a heterotopic space in which people of same-sex desire can build up both homo-social and homo-erotic connections. In this space, the certainties of sexual cartographies and norms are subverted through intensive, repetitive and mutually engaged practices in space. The opportunities for sexual encounters between gay men, and the visual and haptic consumption of male bodies constitute an important part, but not all, of the transgressive geographies in People's Park. Gay cruisers are often bold enough to hold each other's hand, talk on erotic topics, and touch each other's body. More explicitly gendered or sexualized acts, such as kissing, dragging and cuddling, are often sighted in the cruising place, and are generally tolerated by heterosexual park users:

People like us are quite afraid that other people would get to know our sexual orientation. It is a very sensitive thing in China and in our daily life we never talk about that. But here everything is different. You can say whatever you want. Every gay man here is crazy. We are so crazy because we have been oppressed for so long. Here you can have your relief, and sometimes we seem to be too bold and we do not even know where all the gut comes from! (Interview 140911A)

The cruising space in People's Park is also an important site for community formation. By trespassing on the normative boundary of private/public, gay men in People Park actively appropriate a particular urban space to enact their identity as a form of difference which is experienced collectively through sexually loaded practices. Through intensive mutual engagement and interaction in space, an emotionally charged socio-cultural community is emerging amongst the gay people. Many gay cruisers experienced immense anxieties and confusions about their sexual desire before entering the cruising ground, and it is through

this semi-public, semi-private spatiality that their trajectories of life intersect with “those people who are like us”. As one gay man at his mid 30s told:

At the beginning I thought I was such a freak. I felt that I was different and I was rather lonely. But after entering this place I felt better. I got to know that I was not the only one and I felt much better. In our everyday life, it is always embarrassing to face that part of your heart which belongs only to yourself. But here everything becomes normal again... when I was young I thought I was sick and I went to doctors for help. But here those elder gay men would talk with me, and they also tell me that it is not an illness, but just a sexual orientation. It is only in here that I began to accept that I was not sick at all. (Interview 161011A)

Ellis (pseudo name), who is a pioneer in queering People’s Park, also expresses a strong emotional attachment to this space:

The fishing ground belongs to the gay men. In here we feel we are in “our world”. It is our world and our paradise, and we have a strong sense of belonging to it. It is also home for us because it is only in this place that we dare to do things that cannot be done elsewhere. (Interview 091011A)

Still more notably, gay men’s appropriation of urban space has also given rise to a political consciousness that gay men have a right to be present in public space. Many gay cruisers also take this right as a manifestation of their citizenship. This political agency can be seen in gay cruisers’ collective resistance against state-sponsored homophobia during a 2009 police harassment of the cruising ground<sup>8</sup>. During that event the police claimed that People’s Park belonged to the “people”, not gay men. By conjuring up the notion of the “people”, the state discursively played out the dominant hierarchy of power by defining differentiated citizenships and rights to the city. However, gay cruisers adamantly defended the territoriality of the cruising ground by directly confronting the police and claiming “gay men are also part of “the people””. Gay cruisers’ resistance against dominant cultural institutions and the state hegemony has evidenced that queered or sexualized urban space is always politicized and sits at the intersection of cultural hegemony, political power and marginalized social groups’ own political agency.

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<sup>8</sup> See online news from *China Daily*:  
[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-08/29/content\\_8631091.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-08/29/content_8631091.htm)





**Figure 4-2 Gay cruisers sitting on stone benches**

(Source: photograph by the author)

## **Ambiguous meanings of the cruising utopia**

### **Deviancy as a self-experienced cultural trope**

The discussion above has shown the gay cruisers' ability to expand the scope of sexual possibilities by re-appropriating the dominant meanings and narratives of a public landscape. More importantly, the gay cruisers have made the public presence of homosexuality an “open secret” to heterosexual users of the park. Homosexuality as a public presence has prompted the heterosexual outsiders to at least acknowledge and learn to live with those identities and orientations which are radically different from the mainstream heterosexuality. Yet, the gay men's resistance against the confinement of everyday spaces does not guarantee a challenge to dominant cultural institutions and discursive systems. For example, in People's Park the public display of gay intimacies and the performances in the forms of carnivalesque fun and dragging are understood by gay cruisers more as a way to enhance a collective gay identification, rather than stage a visual challenge to hetero-normativity. Gay cruisers in the park attempt to formulate a set of vernacular knowledge which is unintelligible to the heterosexual outsiders. In other words, gay cruisers are keen to

circumscribe the gay space into a cordoned-off social world separated from the tracks of outsiders. They hope to delimit a somewhat privatized gay space despite its public visibility. Mi, a local NGO leader working on gay community issues, commented that gay men in People's Park are more likely to see the gay space and the rest of the park as "two parallel universes":

What the gay people want is that if you are not homosexual, then it is the best for you not to feel anything special in the park. The gay men don't want to send any signal to heterosexual people. They don't want their vernacular knowledge to be understood by outsiders. The gay men only send signals to their kind. And the world of the gay men and the world of heterosexual users of the park are basically two parallel universes. (Interview 300911A)

Cruisers in People's Park expect that if the heterosexual others cannot sense the signals sent by gay men, their perceived spatial order will not be considered to be invaded by homosexual cultural expressions. Thus the gay cruisers' transgression of the public/private divide may not be viewed as a major threat to the heterosexual cultural norms. The gay men's attempt to confine their social world outside heterosexual others' recognition can be partly explained by many cruisers' discursive construction of gayness as a deviant cultural identity. The internalization of the cultural stigmas attached to homosexuality enables gay men's discursive production of the homosexual self in relation to the dominant heteronormativity: since gay men are a sexual minority in the society, gay identity is inevitably a shame and a deviancy (Goffman, 1963). Some gay men even consider homosexuality to be immoral and pathological, since it counters the routines of marriage and reproduction and leads to sexual indulgence and degeneracy. One gay man extends this self-experience of stigma to such an extreme:

Homosexuality is a mistake, and it is pathological. It is a problem in your mentality. Homosexuality is also immoral since homosexual love is not allowed in our cultural system. If gay men could ever have a choice, he would never choose to be a gay, because no one can accept a homosexual relationship. I do not mean that gay men are bad people. It is just because the vast majority of the people are heterosexual that our difference, our deviancy is bound to be condemned. (Interview 140911B)

As a result most gay men concur that it is better not to reveal their homosexual identity or desire to the heterosexual outsiders in the park. This mentality of self-concealment is a co-product of the socially constructed shame for homosexuality internalized in a gay subjectivity and the fear for discrimination or direct conflict with heterosexual users of the park – "the heterosexual outsiders are easy to get angry" (Interview 270811B). For many gay

cruisers, homosexuality is burdened with highly negative meanings and connotations in the context of Chinese culture. Thus although they demand homosexuality to be more visible at a collective level, they also insist that at an individual level anonymity to the heterosexual outsiders is quintessential.

The subtle tension between a collective visibility and individual invisibility also needs to be understood beyond the immediate context of the park and in the gay men's discursive production of a Chinese national identity. Gay cruisers are prone to construct the traditional Chinese culture as too conservative for an overt and confrontational gay politics of liberation. Dominant social and cultural institutions are thought to be embedded in China's long history, so it is too consolidated for any minority group to fundamentally destabilize. The constitutive outside of this cultural imaginary of authentic Chineseness, not surprisingly, is a "Western" culture which is imagined to be liberal, progressive and tolerant:

China is more conservative. I know that in the Western, or more developed countries, people are quite open in talking about homosexuality and gays. Those countries have already opened to these issues, and their people are also more liberal-minded. But in China our culture is still conservative. Our mindset has not progressed very much during the past several decades or so. The Western countries are more progressive than us. We are still lagging behind in our mentalities and in our ideas. (Interview 121111A)

This imagined geography articulates gay men's subjectivity with broader cultural institutions. As a result, most gay cruisers in People's Park eschew making direct contact with or revealing their sexual identity and desire to heterosexual park users. The self-construction of gayness as a deviant social identity also prompts many gay men to narrate a sense of being out-of-place: it is gay men who have "invaded" the space owned naturally by the mainstream, heterosexual people. In those narratives, gay men are depicted as essentially outsiders to urban public spaces and simultaneously invaders into the life of "ordinary people" (Interview 161011A). Gay cruisers in People's Park often adopt a fairly ambiguous attitude in terms of whether or not the cruising space in the park belongs to "people like us". This dichotomization between deviancy and normalcy elucidates the porosity of the discursive boundaries delineating gay identity and the proximity of gay subjects, both spatially and socially, to the presence of heterosexual others (*à la* Probyn (1996)).

### **Gay dancing in the park: struggling with the notion of normalcy**

Gay cruisers' struggle between a constructed notion of deviancy and the hegemonic definition of normalcy is vividly manifested in the practice of gay dancing in the park. In People's Park, public dancing is organized by heterosexual park users as a form of leisure

activity. Many gay men are active participants in those dancing events. For the gay men, the cultural meanings of dancing with heterosexual people are rather complex and manifest many subtle contradictions in the formation of a gay subjectivity. On the one hand, dancing in public space can be seen as a site of expression and emancipation for the gay dancers. Many gay dancers believe that in dancing they can experience an enhanced gay pride, since gay people seem to have particular talents and proclivity for arts and choreographed bodily movements. In those dancing events, gay dancers are often dressed in flamboyantly decorated costumes; and by dancing alternately with both gay partners and ordinary, heterosexual men and women, gay dancers also put into question any absolute difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality. As the gay dancers told, most heterosexual people participating in the dancing events are clearly aware of the gay men's sexual identity. But through intensive mutual engagement, the rigid boundary of self-other is often rendered obscure. As a result those heterosexual others often compliment gay dancers on their dancing skills, rather than express contempt for their non-mainstream sexual identity. As one gay dancer commented:

Gay people have a particular talent for arts like singing and dancing. If you are not gay, then it is rather difficult for you to learn those skills. So many gay men like dancing because in dancing we often feel that gay men are even more outstanding than the heterosexual... The People's Park is really an extraordinary place because here the heterosexual can appreciate our talents. Through the interactions between the heterosexual and us, I think their hostility towards us has been somehow alleviated. (Interview 110911B)

But in the meantime, a dancing event can also be the arena for gay dancers to embrace the hegemonic notion of normalcy. During the participation in public dancing, various subject positions are enacted by gay cruisers in order to consolidate an atmosphere of normalcy. First of all, dancing is interpreted by gay cruisers as an asexual and hygienic form of leisure for all park users. It mirrors gay cruisers' expectation that sexual desire, either heterosexual or homosexual, should be made less perceivable in public space (Hubbard, 2000). Second, dancing is also viewed as an intimate and face-to-face engagement with others, yet without the need to explicitly reveal one's sexual identity. Gay cruisers insist that they would like their heterosexual dancing partners to feel a certain degree of obscurity about their sexual identity, since a directly disclosed gay identity may disrupt the encoded "normalcy" of the dancing space. They also carefully delimit the boundaries of languages and acts in order to pass as a normal and non-threatening heterosexual social subject. Flirting with other gay men, bodily touch and talk on erotic topics are strictly avoided in the space of dancing. In some cases gay men will deliberately evade dancing with another gay man but prefer a

heterosexual, female partner. Although dancing events are often used by the gay men for socialization, there is a shared rule amongst the gay dancers that sexual desire and identity should not be displayed explicitly in the sociality during public dancing. Socialization amongst the gay dancers, as a result, is mostly in the form of teaching and learning dancing skills. The gay dancers have drawn a strict distinction between the “gay belt” in which a gay identity can be more overtly performed and a “dancing space” in which established sexual order should not be interrupted:

You need to watch your conducts when dancing in the park. First of all, normally we prefer dancing with a female. You know dancing between two men may be considered weird and abnormal by other people. Second, you need to watch your language. If I ever dare to say any “dirty” or “sexy” things, other gays will surely criticize me. You know, the gay space over there is an “abnormal” place – you can be crazy over there, you can touch guys or say some erotic things. But here the norms and rules are different. (Interview 210911A)

Through the experiences of dancing, the abstract notion of normalcy is actively lived by gay cruisers. Many gay men even attempt to re-enact the identity of a “normal” social member in the dancing space. The “gay belt” is considered by many cruisers to be too heavily encoded with the symbols and meanings of “abnormality”; and it is seen as a Janus-faced spatiality bifurcating into both emancipation and alienation. The dancing space, on the contrary, sets up a strict limit upon transgressive acts and can be exploited by gay cruisers to restore a sense of normalcy. Many gay dancers reflect that dancing with a heterosexual woman gives them the opportunity to live and experience “a normal sexual identity”. Also, some gay dancers even avoid entering the “gay belt”, since they feel uneasy about explicit expressions of gayness. But their emotional attachment to People’s Park’s “gay ambience” would always “bring them back”. In this case those gay cruisers creatively use the dancing space as a buffer zone between everyday spaces of oppression and too straightforward expressions of homosexual desire: *“when I want to be ‘in’, I can just go to the ‘gay belt’, but when I want to be ‘out’, I just join the leisure activities here but still keeps a proximity to the gayness here”* (Interview 210811A).

Thus gay men who participate in the dancing events seem to counteract the transgressive geographies founded on a territorialized gay space and attempt to bring their subjectivity back into interaction with the hegemonic notion of normalcy. During the interviews, many gay men affirm that their “difference” is not irreconcilable with the dominant and the mainstream. In order to survive within the existing social and cultural structures gay men cannot circumscribe their life within a homosexual identity and they need to interact with the mainstream society. So it is wiser to incorporate certain meanings and norms of the

mainstream into the constitution of a gay subjectivity, rather than directly challenge the conventional definition of the normal:

Even though we are gay, life must continue, right? No one lives in isolation, and we cannot survive if we are not normal enough. We live in this time and in this society, and they are ruled by some principles and norms which are not very gay. But we cannot just abandon them and we must live a normal life from time to time. Humans live together and live in relation to other humans. (Interview 220911B)

For many gay cruisers, dancing in a “not-so-gay” spatiality helps to reposition themselves in an imagined “proper” place of an ordered social and cultural structure. Yet, the notion of normalcy does not refer to the *de-sexualisation* of space; rather, it is the re-centring of space on the orthodox paradigm of sexual subjects built upon the institution of hetero-normativity. Normalcy is framed with reference to a whole set of universal rules and norms in public space, which both the heterosexual and the homosexual are subject to. The public display of homosexual identity and desire also needs to be closely disciplined, even minimized. By engaging with the notion of normalcy, homosexual subjectivity is located in a social proximity to the imagined heterosexuality (Probyn, 1996). Only by looking at the porosity, the uncertainty and the relationality of the social construction of homosexuality can we understand the ways in which a self-disciplining gay subjectivity is configured, as will be discussed below.

## **Stigmatization, public/private divide and self-disciplining subjectivity**

### **Stigmatization and the discourse of “chaos”**

The gay men’s construction of gayness as a deviant identity and their attempt to reconcile a gay identity with the hegemonic divide of normal/abnormal underscore many representations of the cruising space in People’s Park, often outside the accounts of utopia and emancipation. Amongst the gay men in People’s Park, a rhetoric constructing the gay cruising space as a *chaotic* (in Chinese, *luan*) place is predominant. The image of a homosexual in the public, despite all the liberatory potentials that it may contain in itself, is paradoxically construed as the worst image a gay man can ever expect. Plentiful studies have demonstrated that even within the gay and lesbian communities, there are many subtle dynamics of inclusion/exclusion associated with the question of what can be seen as decent or appropriate homosexual cultures or behaviours (Bell and Binnie, 2004; Brown, 2006; Bell and Valentine, 1995a). Stigmatization of the cruising ground in People’s Park derives in part from the class status of the gay cruisers. Middle class gay men in Guangzhou have actively played out

some essential meanings and representations in articulating and circulating this discourse of chaos. The stigmatizing representations of the cruising ground in People's Park find their root in gay cyberspaces and are indicative of many middle class gay men's disdain of the public visibility of homosexual identity. In such representational repertoires, decent and non-threatening expressions of homosexual desire exist only in a private space; and gay men who cruise in public space are associated with negative labels such as indecency, promiscuousness and disease-carrying. In fact, online representations of the cruising ground in People's Park are so homogenously centred on those cultural tropes of dirtiness, indecency and promiscuousness that many cruisers view these representations as a culturally oppressive online discursive space:

On the Internet if you happen to have said "I am going to People's Park", you will receive some responses saying "you must be a promiscuous slut". People's Park has been given a very bad reputation amongst gay men online, and many gay men loathe public cruising places. (Interview 221011B)

The image of a disorderly, immoral and undesirable cruising "dystopia" has been incorporated into many gay cruisers' own narrating schemes of the cruising ground in the park. Their emotional attachment to the cruising space is simultaneously eroded by the stigmas attached to it. Much of the anxiety emerging amongst the gay cruisers concerns how they would be able to reconcile their visibility and publicity with the entrenched idea that homosexuality is deviant, abnormal and should not be seen in public space. The tension between the inevitable visibility of cruising gay men and their attempt to re-embrace the notion of normality further reinforced the perceived unruliness of gay cruising space.

Amongst all the representations of the gay space in People's Park, two issues concern the gay cruisers the most. First, sexual encounters happening in the park's two public lavatories are severely contested amongst the gay cruisers. Sex in public toilets is almost unanimously constructed as deviant, transgressive, and filthy. Since public lavatories are spaces which shape the frequent encounters between the homosexual and the heterosexual, as the cruisers contend, they need to be voided of homosexual expressions. Second, in People's Park there exist male-to-male prostitution, theft, robbery and also extortion. The presence of these "illegal" acts has led many gay cruisers to rethink the relations between the cruising space, the Chinese state and the established legal framework. These two themes will be discussed more elaborately later.

### **"We need to be low-profile": the constitution of a self-disciplining subjectivity**

These stigmatizing representations of the cruising ground and gay men's attempt to reconcile their "deviancy" with the dominant definition of normalcy anchored a self-disciplining subjectivity into the collective yearning for a gay identity. At the heart of this self-disciplining subjectivity is the construction of gay men as an essentially different and deviant minority group whose presence begs the *acceptance* by the mainstream society: heterosexuality will always be the foundation for structuring social relations, and it is futile for the gay men to challenge the hegemony of hetero-normative social rules and norms. One gay man makes an interesting analogy that heterosexuality resembles the main dish of every meal, and its importance will never be challenged by appetizers or desserts:

That is how our society is built and structured. You know, there is always a need for a mainstream. There must be a mainstream because only with it the society can stabilize. Every other thing is organized around this mainstream. It is just like you eating your meal... You may like the appetizers very much, but can you totally ignore the main dish? Certainly you cannot. (Interview 151011A)

By re-asserting heterosexuality as the mainstream and the normal, homosexuality as a form of difference is annihilated, yet in the same time remade and resurfaced. The enactment of a mainstream in relation to a minority social group implies how the interpenetration of multiple publics can disrupt the certainties of both space and identity: the heterosexual mainstream is constituent of, rather than merely opposed to, the production of gay public and gay subjectivity. The tension between gay men's inevitable public visibility and their attempt to stand outside negative stereotypes of abnormality leads many gay cruisers to advocate that they should act in a "low-profile" way and minimize explicit displays or revelations of sexuality and desire. In this rhetoric of self-withdrawal, the discursive focus is placed on gay men's sameness with, rather than difference from, the mainstream. On the one hand, conforming to a whole system of universal social, cultural and legal rules is discursively privileged over the performances of difference: constraints on the acts and behaviours for the heterosexual should also limit the boundaries of homosexual cultures and desires. Thus illegal activities, sex in the toilets and other explicit performances of sexual desire can be critiqued on the basis that "even heterosexual people would not do it" (Interview 151011A). On the other hand, the wish for sameness also rules out, or at least restricts, explicit expressions of homosexual identity and desire in public space, since it undermines the certainties of the mainstream and the dominant. The inclusiveness of sociocultural structures and social spaces, in this sense, only comes with the collective disabling of gay men to articulate explicit gayness or experience dissident intimacies.



Not surprisingly, some local NGOs working on homosexuality issues are also active advocates of this ideology of sameness and normality. Many gay cruisers in the park recall that local NGO volunteers are keen to educate them to comply with the normative codes of conducts in public space. Ah-Qiang, leader of one local NGO, makes this remark:

As a gay activist, I certainly run for the rights movement for sexual minorities. But we also need to note that homosexual people constitute only 3-5 percent of the entire population. So in our progress towards empowerment we need to make concessions. It is a natural logic... What we want to emphasize is our similarity, not our difference... If you exaggerate your difference from others, it will be hard for you to survive in a community. (Interview 181111A)

Conflicts between gay cruisers and heterosexual park users, and the daily discriminations received by gay cruisers also strengthened this self-disciplining subjectivity, which in turn re-shaped gay men's interpretation of such moments of unpleasantness. Gay men mistakenly exhibiting homosexual desire to heterosexual others and heterosexual park users unexpectedly encountering expressions of gayness are the principal sources of conflicts and discrimination. Also, those occasions are often taken advantage of as the excuses for abusive police regulatory practices. Consequently, many gay cruisers end up being convinced that if they too severely transgress the established boundary of normal/abnormal, public/private, it may result in more draconic oppression against the gay people: since the cultural burden that they have inherited is already overbearing, they must be careful not to further add to the biases and prejudices suffered by gay people. Thinking beyond the immediate contexts of conflicts, several gay cruisers also consider cultural oppression and discrimination the result of gay men's own transgression of established norms and rules. They contend that if gay men abide by the normative divide of normal/abnormal in public space, cultural discrimination against gay cruising will disappear naturally. A feasible strategy is to acquiesce in the hegemony of hetero-normativity and refrain from directly challenging the hetero-normative social and spatial order:

You know we are already so different from the normal people. And in order to avoid oppression from the heterosexual society it is better for us to draw as little attention as possible from the outside. Acting in a low profile way is the best strategy for us. When we do anything, the outside will tend to highlight the negative side of our conduct and we can be attached with many labels and stigmas. (Interview 051111C)

With reference to the relation between the gay cruisers and other park users, the golden rule which gay cruisers are generally committed to is that their presence, conducts and behaviours should not bring discomfort to the heterosexual others. Encounters between the

gay cruisers and the heterosexual others need to be disciplined, monitored and sanitized. Several gay cruisers adopted the word “compromise” in describing gay cruisers’ relationship with the heterosexual park users. Those cruisers also affirm that heterosexual others’ hospitality towards gay men in the park is not impossible, but always conditional. At the centre of this conditionality is the principle that gay men in the park should be careful not to challenge a coherent hetero-normative system of socio-spatial norms and values. Therefore gay cruisers must closely monitor their own conducts and behaviours in order not to arouse a sense of disgust amongst heterosexual park users. The gay men’s emphasis on the self-disciplining of conducts in public space is also interwoven with their aspiration to present a sanitized and desirable cultural image of gayness to the heterosexual others. Much of the gay cruisers’ discursive production of a self-disciplining subjectivity is centred on the assertion that inappropriate conducts will add to the negative aspects of the cultural image of gayness. A stage needs to be erected for facilitating sanitized, non-threatening and non-confrontational encounters between gay men and heterosexual others so that an amiable and acceptable image of gayness can be imprinted in heterosexual outsiders’ understanding of gay people. In order to prevent negative stereotypes ascribed to gay people, gay cruisers in the park must minimize their transgression of those layers of meanings established by hetero-normativity. As a result, many cruisers describe those who practice dragging or cottaging (sex in public toilets) as self-depreciating, flirtatious and even immoral and suggest that those deviant and lascivious conducts will reinforce the stigmas attached to the gay community.

The construction of a self-disciplining subjectivity also intersects with the class identity of gay cruisers (McDowell, 2008a; 2008b). Commercialized and privatized spaces of middle class gay men are very commonly described by the cruisers as more decent and desirable places which they long for, yet cannot afford: with a higher degree of economic capital, a higher education level and the power of “buying” the right to space, middle class gay men can build up an enclosed world which are more decent, more civilized and exclusively of “our own”. Gay cruisers interviewed in this research frequently relate the stigmatizing representations of sexualized public spaces to the lower level of economic capital that they possess. Their failure to afford more desirable spaces via economic capital, in turn, enhanced the experience of a subaltern class identity:

The local NGO volunteers always tell us to discipline our conducts in the park. Of course bad conducts will damage the image of the entire group of gay people. But they also need to know that only poor people would come to this type of public cruising places. See, how loathsome poor people can be! Our presence in the park can be automatically seen as disturbing, and even disgusting. (Interview 091011A)

Given that homosexual desire has already been constructed as immoral, deviant and counter-cultural by many gay cruisers, it is not surprising to see many gay cruisers incorporating the hetero-normative divides of public/private, normal/abnormal into the articulation of sanitized gayness. As Richardson (2004) argues, the desire of being normal and good homosexuals who are deserving of inclusion and integration into the mainstream society can fundamentally reshape the meaning and focus of a gay identity. Such a notion of normality presupposes that sexual minorities bear a responsibility to monitor and discipline their conducts in conformity to the dominant cultural institutions and relations of power. In People's Park, this sense of an authentic responsibility designated to gay people is the outcome of the gay cruisers' discursive practices which spotlight normalcy, conformity and sameness. As one gay cruiser summarizes this mentality of self-disciplining:

I need to say five words to all the gay men in the park: self-dignity, self-esteem, sincerity, fidelity and progressiveness. People like us need to regulate our languages and conducts. It is not the case that the heterosexual people discriminate you, but that what we have said and done sometimes makes others have to discriminate us and hate us. There need to be rules in the park. And we should make this place a hygienic, healthy place. We cannot bring negative influence to the city and to the park. (Interview 151011B)

### **Filthiness: contesting cottaging (sex in public toilets)**

Cottaging, or sexual encounter between gay men in the public lavatories, is perhaps the most contested form of gay expression in the constitution of a self-disciplining gay subjectivity. On the one hand, sexual encounters in the public transgress the universal cultural code that sex should only be had in privacy. On the other, since cruising always risks the exposure of homosexual love and desire, some of its particular forms need to be especially supervised. Thus, sexual encounters taking places in the park's two public lavatories are very often critiqued by the gay cruisers. Although many interviewed cruisers actually engage in cottaging, still they tend to describe cottaging as a filthy, inappropriate and even immoral misbehaviour. As probably the most explicit expression of homosexual desire in the park, oral sex, anal sex or even orgy sex in the public lavatories stages a visual challenge to the dominant socio-spatial ordering of sexuality which is intolerable even for gay cruisers themselves. Cottaging brings the encounter between gay men and the heterosexual outsiders to the very frontier of otherness; and it is perceived as the most disturbing to the hetero-normative spatial orders. The normative public/private divide, in this case, is a powerful discursive formulation which defines what can be counted as appropriate behaviours in a

public lavatory. Gay men who conduct sex in public toilets are often portrayed as immoral and filthy, as well as lacking personal quality and a sense of shame:

I think that those who have sex in a public toilet lack a sense of morality and value. If you really need sex, just bring partner home or to something like a hotel. But in public space if you have sex, it is a manifestation of your lack of education and personal quality. Those people are like dogs – dogs do not care about whether it is a public or private space. (Interview 151011A)

Gay cruisers' strong commitment to the notions of morality and value exemplifies the anxiety, uncertainty and instability inherited in a homosexual identity. It also indicates that the cultural imaginary of a normal, heterosexual subject always disciplines the extent to which a gay identity can be enunciated. Since public lavatories in the park are used by both gay men and heterosexual park users, they are seen as sites where encounters between gay men and heterosexual outsiders are the most frequent and intense. Hence many gay cruisers assume that witnessing gay sex or being mistakenly seduced by gay men in public lavatories can result in a strong sense of repugnance amongst the heterosexual outsiders, which will bring notorious reputations to the gay community. The fear that cottaging may negatively influence the cultural image of gayness in the park is the focal point around which many gay cruisers' oppositional stance against sex in public toilets is framed. Three concerns can be identified here. First, many gay men worry that some heterosexual men may be harassed by gay cruisers in the public lavatories, which may result in direct confrontations and a cultural stereotype of hooliganism ascribed to gay people. Second, gay men fear that heterosexual outsiders may consider gay men to be dirty, unhealthy and HIV-carrying, since most sexual encounters in public lavatories are without the use of condoms. Third, many gay cruisers also believe that random, anonymous sexual encounters in public lavatories may be considered by heterosexual outsiders a manifestation of promiscuousness and libertinism.

Interestingly, many gay men are also concerned that public display of homosexual desire can possibly "contaminate" the "mental health" of children who use public lavatories. As Berlant (1997) suggests, fetus, baby or child is often imagined as innocent, asexual purity immune to homosexual desires. The gay cruisers' anxious effort not to pollute children in the park further evidenced how homosexual identity is experienced by the gay men themselves as dirty and deviant:

Being gay does not mean we are not part of the society, right? You see the toilets – they do not belong to the gay people. There are old men and children using the toilets and how would they think of people like us if they find we are having sex there? I don't like that

people think gays are the most licentious group in our society. We cannot bring a gay identity into toilets and dirty sex in toilets cannot be seen as culture. (Interview 151011A)



**Figure 4-3 One of the two public lavatories used by gay men for random sex in People's Park**

(Source: photograph by the author)

### **Illegal acts: the self-construction of criminality**

Like other public cruising places in China, relationships between gay cruisers in People's Park are not one-dimensional. Male-to-male prostitution, theft, and extortion<sup>9</sup> constitute another fabric of homo-social relations not in accordance with romantic sexual encounters and community formation. As a result, despite their emotional attachment, many gay men would portray the cruising ground in the park as a "bad" place in which relations between gay men are "too complicated". More importantly, the presence of the abovementioned "illegal" acts also caused gay cruisers' anxiety about the tension between gay men in the park and the legal framework in China. In one sense, gay cruisers in People's Park seem to adopt a much more relaxed stance towards illegality than cottaging. This relative liberal-mindedness is attributed to the fact that even though those illegal acts are to be condemned

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<sup>9</sup> Extortion and theft generally happens between gay men. For example, one gay man may extort another for a certain amount of money after they have sexual intercourse.

under a universal legal framework, their low degree of public visibility makes them more tolerable than sex in the toilets.

Yet, illegal acts in the park are still of considerable concern to the gay cruisers. Most gay cruisers I talked to consider those acts as tokens of cruisers' self-abandoning and unruliness. While none of my interviewees seemed to have engaged in robberies or thefts, some were indeed identified by other cruisers as occasional sellers of sex. Even these interviewees, however, seemed to have no quarrel with the idea that male-to-male prostitution is despicable and needs to be minimized. A strong rhetoric of criminality makes many gay men relate state regulation and police harassment in the park to the discursively constructed tropes of unruliness and illegality. The presence of prostitution, theft and extortion is often exploited by the municipal government to justify regulation and police harassment in the cruising ground<sup>10</sup>. Although police campaigns are always in the name of regulating illegal acts like theft, robbery or prostitution, gay men are often arrested without evidence of having committed crimes. Still, gay men in People's park tend to view police harassment as justifiable acts of sustaining social order, rather than a manifestation of state-sponsored homophobia. Within a universal legal framework which ostensibly promises equal rights to all its citizens, "it is the gay men's illegal acts which are responsible for the state's regulatory practices". This mentality of self-blaming also affirmed the conviction that due to the inherited difference and otherness of gay men, any act done by them is always-already deviant. Same-sex desire becomes the taken-for-granted referent with which every aspect of gay life is censored and judged; and even gay men's small deviancies will be deliberately amplified by the outside into significant stigmas.

**The researcher:** But robbery, theft and prostitution, all those stuff happen among the heterosexual people as well. They cannot just arrest every single gay man in the park because they believe some individuals have committed crimes?

**The interviewee:** You are right. But why did the police come to regulate us in the first place? That is because we have done something that cannot be tolerated by the society. If we can behave ourselves, the police would not come. For us who are already different from the mainstream, we need particularly to supervise our own conducts. When some gay people did something wrong, the entire group – not individuals – will be assigned with negative labels.

(Interview 151011A)

Surely there are also other gay men who believe that the state's regulation of the cruising place is at least partly out of a homophobic mentality and the oppressive cultural institutions.

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<sup>10</sup> In one of these police harassments, for example, over 100 gay cruisers were arrested by the police. The police charged the gay men of prostitution and extortion, but could not present evidence for each gay man they convicted.

As mentioned before, during the 2009 police harassment, many gay cruisers resisted forcefully for their right to urban space and directly confronted hegemonic state authority. But even those gay men believe that gay cruisers need to self-monitor and self-discipline their conducts in the park so that the police can “pick up no excuse” to harass them. So the gay men’s interpretation of state regulation and the construction of the rhetoric of criminality seem to demonstrate their “deliberate ignorance” of the entrenched structures of unequal power relations. As can be seen from the quote above, the gay men tend to highlight the notions like a universal system of socio-legal norms, gays’ absolute otherness and the need for self-regulation. A self-disciplining subjectivity, in this sense, has been written into the relations of power between gay cruisers, the state and the cultural institutions of homophobia.

### **Negotiating the Chinese state: becoming “legally” gay?**

One dimension which has so far been glossed over but needs closer scrutiny is the attitude of the Chinese state towards homosexuality. To some extent, the making of a self-disciplining subjectivity amongst the gay cruisers in People’s Park reflects their hope to be “accepted” or “tolerated” by the Chinese state. For some of the gay cruisers, their refusal of a more blatant visibility is the result of their experiences of draconian state oppression of homosexuality during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and even in the 1980s and 1990s. Many elderly and middle-aged gay men recalled experiences of arrest and imprisonment after their homosexual desire was discovered. For those gay men a self-disciplining subjectivity mirrors their attempt to construct docile bodies in face of the state regulatory regime.

On the other hand, and more importantly, most gay cruisers believe that self-disciplining can help to soothe the relationship between gay men and the Chinese state. Until now the Chinese state has not adopted any official stance towards the issue of homosexuality. In government discourses, gay men can be traced only in public health documentations where they are simply referred to as the MSM group (men who have sex with men). The Chinese state’s obscure attitude in homosexuality issues and its reluctance in recognizing a collective identity of gayness jointly contributed to the gay cruisers’ belief that homosexuality will at least be tolerated within the existing legal framework, if gay people do not challenge state power and the universal legal codes. Some gay cruisers even suggest that if gay men can behave according to a universal institution of norms and values, the Chinese state will eventually adopt policies favourable to the gay community. A self-disciplining subjectivity, in this sense, seems to provide a strategically appropriate identity for gay cruisers in the park. This somehow opportunistic mentality is illustrative of the gay men’s complex negotiation with both the hegemonic cultural institutions and the relations of political power. This

mentality also helps us to understand why gay cruisers in People's Park consider the acts of cottaging, prostitution, extortion, etc. to be particularly transgressive and deviant in order to justify the state regulation of the park and re-enact the notions of order, decency and propriety.

## Conclusion

This place is their kingdom. In this kingdom all citizens are male. There is no real territory for them, and what they have is a home to their hearts.

They call this place a fishing ground, a place for picking up your man. For every one who lingers in this place, there is a history written behind his mask. They would hide who they are and begin to use nicknames. What they want here is pleasure, short or long.

But now, this kingdom is at the brink of its collapse.

(Ah-Qiang, 14 May 2009)<sup>11</sup>

So what are the implications of this self-disciplining subjectivity for the collective gay culture in People's Park? At one level, this emphasis on self-disciplining is practiced largely discursively, and certainly does not eradicate either "illegality" or explicit expressions of gay identity and desire. As many gay cruisers suggested, this mentality of self-control emerged with the very incipience of the cruising ground. However, this self-disciplining subjectivity is an ideological contour which has been constantly defining and redefining the transgressive geographies and collective gay identity in the park. Under this ideological umbrella, blunt expressions of gayness are often interpreted as deviations from a collective commitment to a more civilized, sanitized gay identity. Gay cruisers previously prone to overt, even illegal activities are increasingly disciplining their conducts. Gay cruisers' resistance against the hegemonic private/public divide is, ironically, in a constant regression towards the concealment, the erasure of the closet.

Throughout this chapter, it has been argued that the publicness of the cruising space in People's Park is less coherent than ambiguous, contradictory. In People's Park, negotiation with the relation to heterosexual outsiders resides within broader cultural institutions and discursive systems. The making of self-disciplining, docile bodies is situated at a social surface of connection, contestation and negotiation. As Probyn (1996) has argued, this surface stands as a way of configuring the lines of forces that compose a domain of the social. Those lines of force are also deeply embedded in historical conditions and relations of power. In People's Park, the gay cruisers' interpretation of sexual identity, collective culture and

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<sup>11</sup> Ah-Qiang, *The secret garden at the crossroad*, online article addressing gay cruising in People's Park, source: <http://www.infzm.com/content/28370> (in Chinese language). Ah-Qiang is the Director of PFLAG Guangzhou, a local NGO working on homosexual communities and LGBT rights movement.



space is inextricably intertwined with the negotiation with heterosexual outsiders, hetero-normative cultural institutions and the power of the state. Public space, in this sense, serves as the terrain on which difference is configured and negotiated, producing complex intentionalities and subject positions.

The argument of this chapter is not to deny that political agency can be realized through a politics of visibility in public space. Indeed, even in People's Park a political consciousness of gay men's right to the city and a resistance identity are in the making. Rather, this chapter suggests that in order to more comprehensively understand the relationship between public space and the formation of sexual identity, we need to take into account the complexity in the meanings and connotations that queered or sexualized public space can engender. Such an epistemological framework, as manifested in the empirical analysis in this chapter, is designed to capture the ways in which any space, private or public, can be outside and simultaneously inside hetero-normative ways of socio-spatial orderings (Brown, 2000). It also speaks to the ways in which hetero-normative rules and orders are grounded in space through complex discursive practices and subject formations. In People's Park, it is the discursive construction of gayness as deviancy and immorality which has delineated the cultural imaginary of an authentic Chinese national identity and a heterosexual, normal social subject. Hetero-normative ideologies and norms, in this case, concern not so much about whom a man should have sex with as the ways in which identity is configured and displayed, always relationally. It is the unsettled, often ambiguous boundaries between the normal and the abnormal that are translated into the meanings of public space.

As this chapter has shown, in People's Park the public visibility of gay identity has to a large extent led to the enhancement, rather than the destabilization, of the dominant cultural institution that stigmatizes and marginalizes gay identity. The cruising space itself is a radical combination of both emancipatory potentials and extended experiences of cultural imperialism and oppression. The construction of a gay subject in People's Park is relational to and constrained by dominant sexual and gender norms. Entering the public cruising space in People's Park is as much a process of re-closeting as a process of coming out of the everyday space of oppression. The cruising ground in People's Park is certainly an escape from hetero-normative cultural domination, but it simultaneously produces new forms of oppression, containment and concealment. As Fuss (1991) so trenchantly points out, homosexual people's debut onto the stage of historical formation was as much an egress as an entry. It surfaces and resurfaces in the domain of the social and renders the constitution of subjectivity radically relational and unstable.

## Chapter 5 From performance to politics? Constructing public and counterpublic in the singing of red songs

“We make history and we are made by history; we make culture and we are made by culture.”

(Storey, 2003, p.58)

### Introduction

In Chapter 2, I have taken some pains to discuss the relations between publicness and the ideal of democratic political participation. Let me provide a brief summarization here. According to classic theories in political philosophy, the notion of “public” can be conceived of in two different ways. In the first place, it can be traced back to the writings of Habermas (1989) and Arendt (1958; 1973) on the formation of the modern public sphere. For these two writers, the public sphere is principally an arena where citizens are free to participate for collective deliberation and negotiation for a common political project (Benhabib, 1996; Staeheli, 2010). Fraser (1990), on the other hand, develops a second approach towards the conception of public which departs radically from the focus on universal participation and consensus-building. Fraser rejects the idea that public sphere arises out of the concerted activities of a plurality of agents for the purposes of rational debate and consensus building. She proposes that public sphere is a realm of contestation and even confrontation between competing *publics*. Thus Fraser advocates a theory of the *counterpublic*, a political regime contesting exclusionary power relations and celebrating alternative political expressions.

As a classic liberal-democratic lexicon, the public is seen to reside in pre-given political forums which reify fixated modes of political interaction and engagement. Its boundary is delineated *prior* to actual actions and practices taking place in it. Thus those theorists who lament the decline of the public sphere in late modernity (Habermas, 1989; Kohn, 2008) are often reluctant to locate time-spaces in which the public is *formed* in alternative ways. On the other hand, the public is often conceptualized as a universal sphere which involves every one considered to be a capable participant in public life, and reifies collective consensus in the form of authoritative views and voices (Warner, 2002; Marston, 1990; Staeheli, 1996). Such an idea of the public endorses the dichotomy of public and counterpublic. In particular, the public is frequently criticized on the ground that in pursuing shared attitudes and consensus it often reproduces hegemonic discourses and forecloses marginal voices. The Habermasian public sphere, in an explicit way, insists on the exclusion of the claims from

those who are not members of the bourgeois class. Arendt's theory of communicative actions seems to be friendlier to a discussion of the radical politics of voice-making. Nonetheless, Arendt emphasizes the construction of inter-subjective agreement, rather than agonistic socio-political relations. In other words, both two theorists focused on the *universality* and *unity* of public, but neglected how the unity of the public realm might be crosscut by competing identities and lines of difference. The counterpublic, in Fraser's (1990) words, is thus seen as the part of the society which is nominally included in the public but nonetheless possesses no position to speak its own voice in this universal social space. It can be anchored in nowhere but the opposite end to the public.

This chapter, however, suggests that there are other ways to situate the notion of *public* into everyday social and political life. In accordance with Fraser's (1990) important theoretical intervention, it concurs that our contemporary society is constituted of multiple *publics*, rather than *one* internally coherent public sphere. Habermas' (1992; 1996) later works, for example, have already extended the discussion on public sphere to public actions built upon particular social groups' collective concerns and claims rather than a universal class position. Moreover, the public is not a pre-given and well defined political sphere awaiting passively social members' participation. Rather, it is a social product which is constructed and practiced through bottom-up actions and engagements. The Arendtian and Habermasian theories of idea exchange, common interests and communicative action are useful for us to understand the inter-subjective mutuality in the formation of the public as a shared political community, but such a conception of the public does not need to be understood in terms of a universal and homogeneous totality.

More recently, the literature on the conception of cultural public sphere has argued that the Habermasian theory of communicative mutuality can be used not only to elucidate rational political projects. Affective, emotional and "unofficially political" dimensions are also important to the construction of reflective dialogicality (McGuigan, 2005). As McKee (2005) has noted, particular social groups' distinctive cultures can be important elements of a sphere of public expression and communication. Thus any social group or social collective can build up their own public on the basis of shared political views, identities and meanings (McGuigan, 2005; Hartley and Green, 2006). As Warner (2002a; 2002b) argues, the public is a self-organized collective of strangers which is addressed by and responds to reflectively circulated discourses. Following this point of view, this chapter conceptualizes the public as any assemblage of social members who create a physical or discursive space in which ideas and meanings are exchanged and shared. The counterpublic, on the other hand, refers to the counter-hegemonic and resistant potentials that the public engenders. The public and the

counterpublic are not mutually exclusive domains. Counterpublic is implicated in the production of an active public; and any public, while potentially reproducing hegemonic discourses (Fraser, 1990), is also radically open to non-conformist and resistant identities and ideas.

The empirical research in this chapter employs the “public” and “counterpublic” as the conceptual points of entry to understand the non-government-led, spontaneously organized singing of socialist “Red Songs” in urban public spaces of Guangzhou, set in the context of both the country’s history of Communist revolution and its more recent post-reform social, cultural and economic transformations. It identifies concrete urban locales as multiple and dispersed *publics* inhabited by specific social members, thus avoiding the universal imagination of public sphere. This chapter analyzes the ways in which political attitudes and identities are performed, maintained and constructed through the public singing of red songs. It argues that the space of song singing constitutes an urban *public*, as it consolidates shared political identities and facilitates the formation of political solidarity. Often it reproduces discourses and identities which conform to the political hegemony of the Chinese party-state. But in the meantime, red song singing also creates a *counterpublic* sphere, as the narratives and meanings that red song singing engenders often counteract and put into question the dominant discourses in contemporary China which deify capitalist economical relations as the only and inevitable end of social progress. The complex interplays of “public” and “counterpublic” in the production of everyday social space will undergird the analyses throughout the chapter.

### **Public space and popular culture: an analytical framework**

The hypothesis in this research is that through the collective red song singing in urban public spaces, a public built upon the communicating of ideas and the sharing of identities emerges amongst grassroots social members. But in what ways is this public actually *formed* through both practices and the circulation of discourses (Warner, 2002a)? Why are the identities and meanings which this public breeds potentially diverse and unfixed? How can the public and counterpublic coexist and constitute each other? To answer these questions, this chapter engages with two projects of analysis. First, this chapter spotlights the role that material spaces and spatial practices play in constituting political meanings and identities. As the empirical analyses in this chapter will show, it is through red song singers’ use and appropriation of public urban space as well as their performative displays of identities in space that a pro-socialist cultural ambience is constructed, experienced and practiced. Also,

it is in responding to this pro-socialist ambience in space that red song singers negotiate their political identities and produce political narratives. Thus this chapter views spatial practice as a constituent element, rather than simply the material expression, of the grassroots public emerging from red song singing.

Undoubtedly scholars have been making efforts to locate the public sphere in urban spaces. Public space serves as the arena in which political ideas are communicated, political claims are expressed, and political solidarity is formulated. The Speaker's Corner and the English coffeehouse are two examples of the ideal of political expression being concretized in the spatialized form (Cooper, 2006; Laurier and Philo, 2007). Other studies followed Fraser's appeal for contestatory and confrontational politics, and examined ways in which dominant power can be questioned and challenged through public demonstrations, protests and other forms of collective claim-making (Mitchell, 2000; McCann, 1999; Lee, 2009; Salmenkari, 2009). Those collective political actions, as D'Arcus (2003) argues, disrupt the established relations of power by giving previously marginalized social groups a consolidated position to *speak*, and by presenting these groups' values and political claims to an audience (Pile and Keith, 1997; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2005).

However, much of the extant research on politicized public space tends to view political identity as pre-given, fixated, and simply transported to established public forums. What fails to be taken into serious account is often the ways in which political identities and meanings are actively performed, shaped and reproduced through social members' participation in public events. It neglects the potential of public space as the social terrain in which political attitudes and identities can be re-asserted, re-negotiated and reproduced through complex cultural experiences, including but not limited to acts of political expression. If the public, as I have argued earlier, emerges from practices and actions, then there is an ongoing dialectic between political meanings and identities and the immediate socio-spatial settings in which these meanings are played out. Public space is not simply the site where *a priori* political claims are expressed, but also the place in which political meanings can be intimately experienced, negotiated and reproduced. Therefore this chapter is interested in experiences, performances and reproduction of political identities implicated in the various processes of meaning-making and place-making. It focuses not on the process in which pre-given, fixed political identity is claimed or expressed, but the ways in which social subjects actively engage with cultural experiences of public social life, and construct discourses and narratives to configure and negotiate their political identifications.

The second project that this chapter will undertake is to present and analyze the various political discourses which shape, but are also shaped by, the public singing of red socialist

songs (Warner, 2002). These political discourses are the cohesive forces of the grassroots public examined in this chapter. Political meanings and discourses constructed through red song singing bear traces of pre-established discourses, but at the same time they are neither unitary nor static. On the one hand, they are performed and negotiated through the microcosms of spatial practices; and on the other, they are situated within diverse cultural experiences and social contexts. Also, any public can be at the same time a counterpublic: a grassroots public may reproduce hegemonic discourses but simultaneously incubates counter-hegemonic and resistant potentials.

In the case of red song singing, the formation of grassroots public and political discourses in which this public dwells depends on the diverse ways in which social members interpret and respond to meanings and symbols which red songs bear. Singing red songs is not simply a collective activity which brings people together. More importantly, red songs are active agents which navigate and shape political narratives, and ideologies and meanings contained in red songs constitute the discursive foundation for the formation of a grassroots public. Grassroots social members choose to sing red songs out of particular cultural identifications, and the construction of this micro-public is also intimately mediated by the ideological frameworks provided by red songs. As Warner (2002a) argues, a public is addressed by discourses, but also produces responding discourses according to its own positions and interests. A counterpublic is implicated in the formation of the public precisely because social members can employ the cultural resources in red songs in radically heterogeneous ways.

In China, the “Red Song” is a “politically correct” popular culture endorsed by the Communist party-state. The primary purpose of the red songs, apparently, is to ensure and sustain the people’s political allegiance to the Communist party-state regime. Popular culture, as Raymond Williams (1980) suggests, is a cultural practice related to social intentions, in particular the structures of domination and subordination exercised by specific social classes. Dominant ideology is inextricably interwoven into the production of popular cultural meanings (Althusser, 1971; Hall, 1996a). Popular culture works to perpetuate dominant ideological ideas and place social subjects in an established, unchallengeable structure of power and social relations (Wolff, 2005).

But dominant ideologies are not simply imposed from above. Ideologies are historically contingent social constructs, as well as representations and discourses which we actually live out (Hall, 1982). As various works in cultural studies have demonstrated, even hegemonic ideological meanings may speak to the interests and needs of particular social groups, thus helping to sustain their cultural identities (Worpole, 1983; Hebdige, 1979; Collins, 1989).

Popular culture produced from above, with all the ideological meanings that it carries, can be appropriated for the production of particular attitudes, ideas and identities (Grossberg, 1992). Gramsci's (1971) theorization on hegemony also helps us to situate the production of dominant cultural meanings into interactive negotiation between dominant and dominated social groups. It rejects the notion of ideology as a monolithic, enclosed discursive system, and places it in the ongoing formation of social relations and social forces. The Gramscian approach towards popular culture foregrounds the cultural and political agencies of both the dominant and dominated social groups and underlines the possibility of articulating popular cultural meanings with various lines of social and political forces (Hall, 1996a). It is possible for popular culture to perform "unruly" elements in opposition to authorial discourses (Hall, 1996b). The Gramscian approach towards popular culture also allows some space for non-hegemonic, alternative meanings and expressions, and renders popular culture a terrain of potentially enormous possibilities for re-constructing and re-articulating cultural and political discourses (Bennett, 1986; Hebdige, 1986).

Bourdieu's theorization on cultural production, to some extent, echoes this Gramscian perspective. On one hand, Bourdieu's (1996a) thesis on popular television and journalism has demonstrated that meanings contained and performed in popular culture constitute a field of knowledge which is deeply rooted in a web of power (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). On the other hand, however, Bourdieu (1993; 1996b) also developed a critical dialectic of *field* and *habitus* to examine complex relationship between an objective field of normativized rules, ideologies and opinions and social subjects' active participation in this social structuring. The field refers to a structured space of dominant power relations, widely accepted rules and legitimated opinions. However, social members are not totally succumbed to this hegemonic space. Instead, subjectivity is developed through social agents' active participation in the *field* through the formation of *habitus*, the assemblage of particular, context-specific *dispositions*. Here, *dispositions* refer to a set of personal states, beliefs and attitudes not imposed by dominant power relations but learned in specific social contexts (Nash, 2003). *Habitus* is developed in response to the *field* by incorporating certain legitimated opinions and ideologies into position-taking. However, the relationship between the *habitus* and *field* is never a close-ended, but always a dialectical system. The field can be fundamentally reproduced and reshaped by new, alternative subject positions extending in multiple vectors and directions.

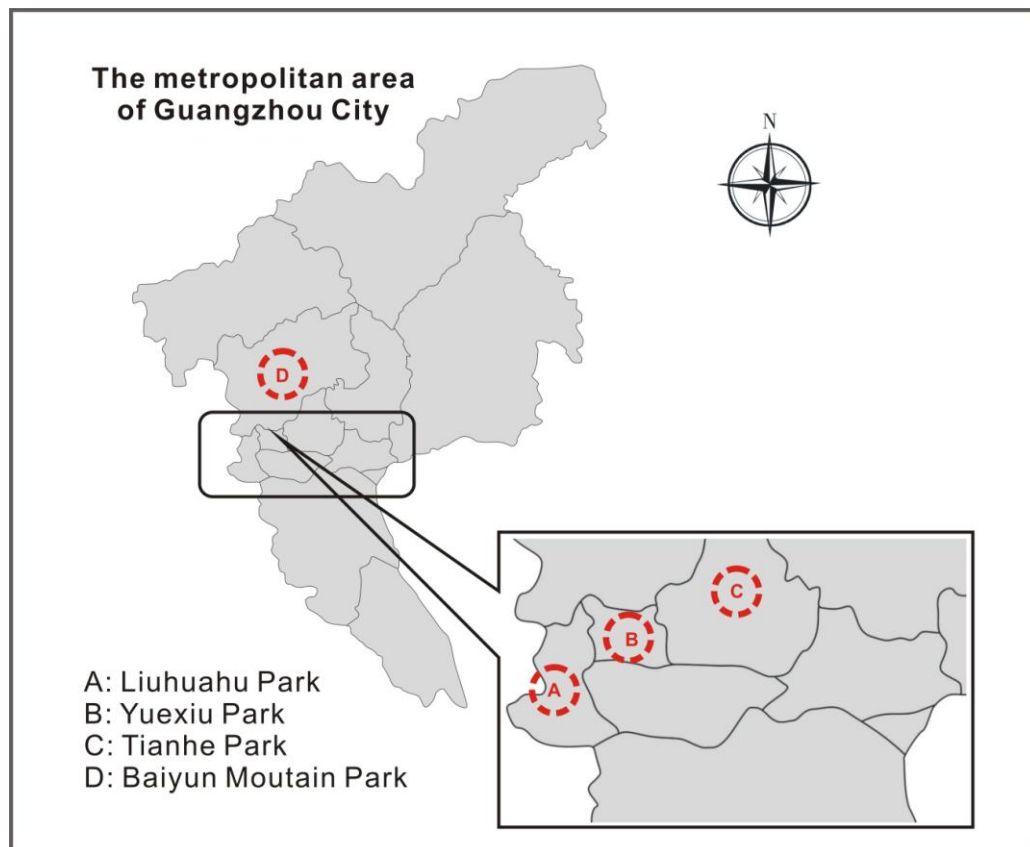
This chapter argues that cultural hegemony embodied by red songs is not a monolithic construct imposed upon social subjects, but encountered and negotiated at the level of personal and collective experiences. There is an ongoing interactive process between

meanings encoded in red songs by the party-state regime and grassroots singers' multiple ways in decoding and re-interpreting those meanings, against particular social contexts and historical conditions (Hall, 1980). It does not foreclose the possibility of grassroots singers to read out critical, even counter-hegemonic meanings and discourses. As we will see in this chapter, red song singers do not simply re-assert the party-state's political legitimacy by expressing political allegiance via red songs. More significantly, they also reconstruct and re-appropriate meanings woven into red songs to critically reflect upon social and economic transformations, as well as the new cultural and ethical *zeitgeists* in the post-reform Chinese society. The singing of red songs constitutes a space in which cultural hegemony in China's political regime is asserted and simultaneously contested.

## Methods

This chapter is based on an intensive field research lasting from September 2011 to January 2012. During that period the author visited and researched red song singing in four sites, respectively Yuexiu Park, Tianhe Park, Baiyun Mountain Park and Liuhuahu Park. In all the four sites red song singing is performed publicly in an open space. Three techniques are employed to collect empirical data. First, both non-participatory and participatory observations have been conducted by the author in the sites of red song singing. Data collected from the observational work are recorded in written form or with videotaping devices. Second, the author collected songs in printed form from two sites of singing: Yuexiu Park and Tianhe Park. In total 557 songs sung in the two parks are collected, of which 296 can be identified as "red songs". Those songs will serve the purpose of an explorative content analysis. In addition, 34 semi-structured, in-depth interviews have been conducted with various actors involved in the singing of red songs. The interviews are designed to collect subjective discursive data in order to examine the interplay of broader socio-political contexts, meanings and the formation of particular cultural identities.





**Figure 5-1 The locations of the four sites of red song singing in Guangzhou**

### **Setting the Scene: introducing the culture of red songs**

The “Red Song” is the name given to a unique political culture situated in the context of the communist/socialist party-state regime of China. In most cases, red songs are those which represent the party-state regime as the emancipator of previously oppressed and exploited people and the leader of national progress and development. In other circumstances, red songs serve as the means for preaching “politically correct” moral principles and ideologies, such as collectivism, patriotism and altruism. Although themes in the red songs are fairly diverse, at the heart of this popular culture is the party-state’s political initiative to win the collective consent and conformity of the people to the party-state regime, under the overarching banner of socialism. In the post-reform Chinese society, “socialism” is a highly ambiguous term; and many of its authentic meanings and connotations cannot find anchor in the social and economic realities any longer. Yet, China is still officially a “socialist” state; and socialism is a signification, a discursive contour which supports the political legitimacy of the party-state regime. It is part and parcel of a sophisticated system of “red culture” supporting the ideological superstructure of the Chinese state. For ordinary folks in China,

the red culture is a taken-for-granted element in the entire cultural fabric of the Chinese society, although it has become increasingly detached from many people's everyday life in the post-reform era since 1978.

In the Western representations, red culture is almost unanimously portrayed as a product of the party-state's campaign for manipulating the "spirits"<sup>12</sup> of the people through ideological brainwashing and propaganda<sup>13</sup>. Especially after China's three decades of reform and economic liberalization, the red culture appears to represent the state authority's desperate efforts to maintain a hegemonic framework of beliefs and values, and instil a sense of national pride and common purpose in an increasingly consumerist and fragmented society. It recounts from time to time the "founding myth" of the socialist China in order to restore the unity of a quickly diversifying populace<sup>14</sup>. Meanwhile, red songs, and the red culture as a whole, are continuously haunted by the national traumas of the Great Cultural Revolution, making the red culture a highly contested terrain even amongst the political elites of the party-state regime<sup>15</sup>.

In the accounts published by domestic Chinese scholars, however, red songs are often celebrated as the manifestation of Chinese people's wholehearted support for the leadership of the party-state regime<sup>16</sup>. They are defined as the historical records of national independence, socialist liberation and national progress. Red songs signify the "splendid history of the Revolution", and instil politically correct views of life, value and the world. It provides an ideological and discursive framework in order to insert the party-state into the production of Chinese national identity. Nationalism, socialist/communist revolution, and the building of a prosperous and promising socialist country are the predominant themes in the red songs.

But as a popular culture produced top-down by the state, yet lived and practiced by the ordinary people, the red song is far from an abstract pedagogical device. On the contrary, it is rich in narratives and meanings, and relates dominant ideologies and values to concrete historical moments and collective experiences. It also speaks to many political and social

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<sup>12</sup> Richburgh K B, "China's 'red culture' revival unwelcome reminder to some", 18 June, 2011, *The Seattle Times*, online article: [http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/2015452798\\_chinared29.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/2015452798_chinared29.html)

<sup>13</sup> Chang G G, "China's 'Red Culture': Let's All Sing Revolutionary Songs", 26 April, 2011, *World Affairs*, online article: <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/gordon-g-chang/china%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98red-culture%E2%80%99-let%E2%80%99s-all-sing-revolutionary-songs>

<sup>14</sup> Moore M, "China launches 'Red Culture' drive", 3 May, 2011, *The Telegraph*, online article: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8489484/China-launches-Red-Culture-drive.html>

<sup>15</sup> FlorCruz, J, "'Red' culture campaign sweeps China", 30 June, 2011, *CNN World*, online article: [http://chapters.cnn.com/2011-06-30/world/china.red.campaign\\_1\\_red-songs-chongqing-bo-xilai?s=PM:WORLD](http://chapters.cnn.com/2011-06-30/world/china.red.campaign_1_red-songs-chongqing-bo-xilai?s=PM:WORLD)

<sup>16</sup> Liu Q, "Why are Red Songs red", *Xinxiang Forum*, 2011(3): 24-25

processes central to the formation and evolution of the party-state regime. To provide a sketchy introduction of red songs and a broad context of public red song singing, I develop an explorative content analysis of 557 songs collected from two of the four sites of red song singing: Tianhe Park and Yuexiu Park (528 from Tianhe and 202 from Yuexiu, with 173 songs known to both sites). Since public singing of red songs in Guangzhou is also used as a leisure activity accommodating the red song singers' demands for outdoor relaxation, not all the songs sung in those sites can be categorized as "red songs". It also appears that most of the red songs are "old songs" whose composition and circulation dated back to the pre-reform era. In the meantime, most non-red songs were produced in the post-reform era. Therefore, I develop a dual-track coding framework for categorizing all the songs I have collected. On the one hand, the year 1978, which is the start of China's economic and political reform, is defaulted as the watershed to categorize each song as either "old" or "new". On the other hand, 296 songs in total have been categorized as "red songs"; and the criteria for this categorization are: 1) red songs speak to national social, economic or political processes under the overarching framework of socialism or socialist revolution; or 2) red songs serve to secure the political legitimacy of socialist party-state regime through applauding the Party's leadership and advocating Party-endorsed values and ideologies; or 3) red songs extol social and economic progress and development under the party-state regime.

Table 5-1 presents the distribution of all the songs across different categorizations. Amongst these songs, 53.1% can be categorized as "Red Songs" and 57.3% were songs produced in the pre-reform era. The percentage of red songs is not significantly high, indicating that outside a strict, state-led framework of enforced ideological education, the sites of public singing enjoy certain flexibility in determining how "red" they should be. Yet, for the singers themselves red songs are often discursively constructed as the "essence" of the singing event, which determines its intrinsic nature and core meanings. Red songs are commonly described as an aesthetically more sophisticated culture saturated with dense emotional investment and social meanings. For these singers, red songs invite extensive sentimental and emotional responses, and are distinct from those forms of "commodified, fast-food-style popular culture.

**Table 5-1 The percentages of old/new songs and red/non-red songs**

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Old songs	319	57.3%
New songs	238	42.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>100%</b>
Red songs	296	53.1%
Non-red songs	261	46.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>100%</b>

A cross tabulation analysis provides some further insights. As we can see from Table 5-2, amongst all the red songs 74% are “old” songs produced in the pre-reform era. Amongst the “new” songs only 32.4% can be categorized as “red songs”, while amongst the “old” songs the percentage is 68.7%. The predominance of the pre-reform era in the production of red songs is apparent through these statistics. The cultural discontinuity between the pre-reform and the post-reform eras can also be glanced here. The pre-reform era played a much more active role in producing and circulating orthodox socialist ideologies and cultural symbols.

**Table 5-2 The cross tabulation analysis between different categories**

	Non-red songs	Red songs	Total
<b>New songs</b>	Frequency	167	77
	Percentage (Horizontal)		238
	(%)	67.6%	32.4%
	Percentage (Vertical) (%)	100%	42.7%
<b>Old songs</b>	Frequency	100	219
	Percentage (Horizontal)		319
	(%)	31.3%	68.7%
	Percentage (Vertical) (%)	38.3%	74%
<b>Total</b>	Frequency	261	296
	Percentage (Horizontal)		557
	(%)	46.9%	53.1%
	Percentage (Vertical) (%)	100%	100%

The importance of different themes in those songs also varies significantly between the pre-reform and post-reform eras. I have sorted out the themes displayed in each red song, and Table 5-3 lists the percentages of old or new red songs which present these different themes. Throughout the two periods, only the Party (represented as the pillar of the party-state

regime) and the Liberation Army/Red Army (represented as the symbol of military struggle and national defence) have enjoyed relatively stable significance despite rapid social and cultural changes. Chairman Mao Tse-Tung was the major character in 35.6% of all red songs produced in the pre-reform era. This figure declined drastically to zero amongst red songs produced in post-reform era. Here the decline of Mao as a national symbol of socialism and political unity in the post-reform era is most telling. In a similar way, the themes of “Liberation” (9.6%), “Revolution” (11.4%), “Liberation of ethnic minorities” (13.2%) and “Socialism/Marxism” (5.9%) were significant in the pre-reform era but have been fundamentally downplayed in the post-reform time. Besides, anti-Japanese and anti-USA struggles (9.6%) in which the Communist Party played an active, or even decisive role were also highlighted in red songs produced in the pre-reform era but largely absent in those new red songs. Amongst red songs produced in the post-reform era, direct semantic referents to revolution, liberation and socialism have faded in an impressive way. Instead, national identity or patriotism has surfaced as the most significant theme in the new red songs (36.4%). Another important theme, unsurprisingly, speaks to national economic and industrial development under the leadership of the party-state since the political and economic reform. Given that economic development has become the quintessential foundation of the party-state’s political legitimacy and cultural hegemony in the post-reform era (Su, 2011), the stress on economic development in the new red songs underscores the Communist Party’s transition from a revolutionary to a governing and managerial state regime.

Several conclusions can be drawn to elucidate the different ways in which political legitimacy of the party-state were/are played out, as shown in the changing representational portfolios displayed in the red songs. In the earlier days of the People’s Republic, the Communist Party’s political legitimacy was discursively upheld through 1) the promotion of Mao as the personification of socialism as well as the national leader under whom the people were mobilized and unified; 2) the rhetoric of liberation and revolution, signifying a fundamental change in the mode of economic production and social structure, and the erection of a socialist system of economic and social organization; 3) the emphasis on the role that the Party played in winning victory over external imperial forces. In a radically different way, in the post-reform era the party-state regime seems to be less interested in propagating overtly “Marxist” or “socialist” ideologies in the production of hegemonic cultural representations. Instead it tends to depict itself as the guard of a coherent, bounded national space and national identity, as well as the engine of national economic development.

The highlight on economic development seems to correspond to the unprecedented economic transition and growth in the post-reform Chinese society.

**Table 5-3 Distributions of different themes in old/new red songs**

Themes	In old red songs (%)	In new red songs (%)
Communist Party of China	14.6%	11.7%
Chairman Mao	35.6%	0%
National Identity	3.7%	36.4%
Liberation Army/Red Army	23.3%	28.6%
Revolution	11.4%	1.3%
Anti-Japan/Anti-USA	9.6%	1.3%
Economic development/Industrial development	14.6%	20.8%
Liberation	9.6%	1.3%
Liberation of ethnic minorities	13.2%	1.3%
Socialist morality	5.9%	3.9%
Socialism/Marxism	5.9%	1.3%
People's Communal	3.7%	0%
Internationalism/Global communism	1.8%	0%
Class struggle	1.4%	0%
Others	6.9%	5.2%

But the “old” and “new” red songs are not two mutually separate discursive spheres. On the contrary, both are intended to uphold the political hegemony of the party-state in the *present*. In official state propagandas, the social life and political relations portrayed and extolled in the old red songs are not simply viewed as collective memories, but rather imagined to be the foundation of the life-world in which contemporary Chinese people continue to dwell. Due to the persistence of socialism in official discourses, the narratives of socialism, revolution and liberation still feed into the political legitimacy of the party-state regime. The once “liberated” socialist people are still considered to be liberated, officially. Yet, many of the orthodox socialist ideologies are no longer anchored in the socioeconomic realities of the post-reform China. Thus the political legitimacy constructed on the basis of these signifiers disarticulated from everyday experiences is radically open to deconstruction and “unruly” interpretations. Indeed, the drastic economic transition towards a capitalist

economy (Smith, 1993) in the post-reform era is the axis around which much of the singers' reading of red songs can be organized, articulated and comprehended, as I will discuss later.

### **Public space as an experiential construct: performativity in the singing sites**

Yuexiu Park, Tianhe Park, Baiyun Mountain Park and Liuhuahu Park are four important urban parks in the city of Guangzhou, and located respectively in the urban districts of Yuexiu, Tianhe, Baiyun and Liwan. Conveniently accessible via public transport, all the four parks are renowned urban public spaces for organizing grassroots leisure and cultural activities. In each park, the site of red song singing occupies a relatively small space and is normally used exclusively for collective singing. Most participants in the singing of red songs are retirees or previous workers laid-off from state enterprises during China's economic reform. These people afford a considerable amount of leisure time and participate in the singing events almost on a daily basis. On weekends, there are also numerous young and middle-aged participants. Normally, singing events in each site are organized and managed by several key participants. The involvement of the state in the event of public singing is quite limited. Public singing is organized spontaneously at a grassroots level, and the singing event itself constitutes a fairly inclusive space: anyone who passes by in the singing site can join the singers freely. In all the four sites, singing starts around 9 o'clock in the morning and the numbers of participants can range from a hundred to a thousand according to locations and times. Singing is always practiced collectively by all the participants, but meanwhile led by a singing leader. It is the singing leader's responsibility to initiate a particular session of singing and encouraging the seated singers to actively and intently participate in this collective event. Lyrics of the songs are written on large cloths or papers and hung above the singing leader's stand. In Yuexiu Park and Tianhe Park, small brochures with songs and lyrics in the printed form are also distributed to ordinary singers.

The elderly people, who constitute the majority of all the singers, tend to describe themselves as the "older generation" whose mindset is deeply imprinted with the orthodox ideological registers of revolution, socialism and Maoism. Yet, most of them suggest that in the post-reform era the experience of a socialist cultural identity becomes increasingly attenuated in everyday life; and family members – especially their children – are emotionally distanced from the "red culture". In these singers' narratives, the intrinsic cultural meanings of red songs sit uncomfortably with the predominant logics of economic development and money-making in the post-reform Chinese society and are often devalued in most spaces of

everyday life. It is not to say that one cannot sing red songs in private spaces, but singers in the parks believe that it is only through collective singing in a public space that red songs can be intensively encountered and experienced. In the sites of public singing, individuals' cultural identity intersects and overlaps with that of others through the collective experiences of "authentic" cultural symbols of socialism, creating a shared turf of cultural orientation and identification:

Before the Reform, the red cultural atmosphere is the centre of our everyday life. Now everything has changed. Sometimes I talk about red songs with my son and grandson, and they simply do not listen. They have their own beliefs and cultures, and they cannot really adjust to our tastes. So in my family I always avoid explicitly displaying any element of red culture (Interview 30122011 A, Tianhe Park)

This lament over the decline of "red cultural atmosphere" in the post-reform era compels the red song singers to actively re-appropriate a public site into a heterotopic space for the restoration and experience of their cultural identity. During the singing of red songs, the notions of the Party and a socialist China constitute the core around which cultural meanings are produced and expressed. More often than not, this pro-socialist cultural identity is anchored in the symbols and representations of the Maoist past. The authentic socialist meanings, representations and symbols inherited from the Maoist time are those which the singers are most attached to. An authentic socialist cultural ambience is staged through the entanglement of both bodily and symbolic practices.

In the first place, the physical conditions of the space are upgraded to fit with the purpose of collective singing. Each of the four singing sites is equipped with rows of stone seats and also a stand for a singing leader, both funded by the authority of the park in which the singing site is located. Normally, the singing leader's stand faces directly to the stone seats, creating a stage-like, theatrical atmosphere. The singing space is also carefully decorated by the singers. Colourful flags, red lanterns and trinkets are hung all over the singing site to create an ambience of festivity and celebration. Sometimes political symbols of socialism, such as China's national flag and red banners reading "Long live the Communist Party, long live Chairman Mao" or "Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts", are also displayed in the singing site, instilling a certain flavour of the nostalgia for the Maoist era into the constitution of cultural space.





**Figure 5-2 The decorated space of red song singing in Baiyun Mountain Park**

(Source: photograph by the author)

Yet, cultural identity is not stable or fixed (Butler, 1990; 1993). It is continuously re-negotiated and reproduced through the display and performance in particular social and cultural milieus. It is also essentially placed. Particular identities activate the production of specific spaces, and space in turn is constitutive of performed cultural identities. During a singing event, it is through the interactive engagement between the singing leaders, ordinary singers and the red songs that a socialist cultural identity is performed and experienced. The role played by the singing leader is pivotal in arousing a socialist cultural atmosphere. In each site of red song singing, the singing leader is responsible for keeping the singers focused on the songs by controlling the rhythms of singing and making bodily movements to attract the singers' attention. Sometimes the singing leader also invites other singers to make bodily movements after her. She may also sing herself, often with a microphone and in a passionate and self-obsessed manner. Often, she imitates the moments of public political propaganda in the Maoist era by making exaggerated gestures and bodily movements. Si-Ge, one of the singing leaders in Baiyun Mountain Park, always wears a Red Scarf<sup>17</sup> and a

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<sup>17</sup> A Red Scarf is a symbol of socialism worn by young school students in China and still in practice nowadays.

typical soldier's cap in the 1960s and 1970s, and holds in hand a copy of *Quotations from Chairman Mao* when leading a singing event. Such a style makes his appearance resemble a typical Red Guard in the Cultural Revolution. Si-Ge himself seems to be fairly fascinated with performing this cultural image and often reiterates the political slogans dating back to that time, such as:

Every word said by Chairman Mao is truth, and one of his words is equivalent to ten thousand words!

Unite! All the people of the world! And together we will uproot capitalism and imperialism!

Understood, Chairman Mao's orders should be executed; not understood, Chairman Mao's orders should be executed as well!

Comrades of the proletariat class, Chairman Mao's Red Guards make salutation to you!

The singing leaders also enhance the socialist cultural atmosphere by directly linking the practice of singing to broader historical contexts of socialism and revolution. During the singing event, the singing leader often expresses her attitudes on some key themes in red songs and inspires the singers to reflect upon the cultural meanings in them. She would also present her own interpretations of the red songs and elicit responses amongst the singers. Key historical figures and events in the history of Chinese socialism are often recalled to connect red songs to concrete historical moments and established historical narratives. In this way, a huge amount of historical narratives, discourses and symbols are brought back to the space of singing by actively experiencing and interpreting the red songs.

Ordinary singers, on the other hand, are not passive in this public drama of singing. Every red song in the singing space is sung collectively by all the participants; and when it comes to a renowned or historically important song, the singers often stand up and make some bodily movements according to its rhythm. Often, the singing leader would invite different sections of the singers to make different bodily movements, all coordinated in harmony with a coherent rhythm. Those collective acts reinforce the sense of a collective cultural identification. The space of singing also carves out a participatory milieu for the ordinary singers. They are often encouraged to present a small performance or show, often in the form of dancing according to one particular red song or simply repeating a piece of dancing previously performed in the Maoist era. In many cases, those performances remind the red song singers of the mass cultural activities in the Maoist time and bring them into intensive interactions with the red songs as the assemblage of memories and cultural meanings.



**Figure 5-3 Performativity at the sites of red song singing**

(Source: photograph by the author)

Through these interactive and performative processes, the sites of red songs singing have been appropriated into public spaces in which collective cultural experiences are catalyzed through both bodily engagement and lived practices. These spaces create a dense ambience of socialism through the active participation and playful performance of the red song singers. This process renders the collective singing of red songs a lived cultural experience actively engaged and practiced at a grassroots level, rather than a means of enforced ideological education.

The above description of red song singing also suggests that the red song singers are still more inclined to draw cultural symbols and resources from the pre-reform or the Maoism era, the “most socialist” period in the Chinese history, despite rapid cultural and ideological changes in the post-reform era. How the orthodox, authentic ideas, values and ideologies of socialism/Maoism are negotiated in relation to different historical epochs and political processes, especially in the context of the relentless cultural and social transformation in post-reform Chinese society is indeed the focal point around which the cultural meanings in the red songs are interpreted, reproduced and negotiated in the formation of the red song singers’ political attitudes and identities.

## **Political discourses in the public: political allegiance and critical reflection**

### **The dialectics of space, popular culture and political identities**

The performance of red song singing is not only a playful public drama. It also creates a space for the red song singers to re-negotiate their cultural and political identities. The pro-socialist cultural ambience instills into the grassroots public new cultural and political energies. It sustains, confirms and simultaneously enhances the red song singers' cultural identification to the meanings and symbols of socialism. To some extent, the singing of red songs is for the expression and experience of pre-established political identities. Many pioneering participants' attachment to socialist culture was prior to collective red song singing. But red song singing also works to educate new and younger participants. Meanwhile, the actual contents of a pro-socialist cultural identity rediscovered and performed in the post-socialist era are also actively re-negotiated and reconfigured, thus contributing to the formation of new political attitudes and narratives. Mutual communications amongst the singers enrich their understandings of socialism, and the performative displays of socialist culture also affirm from time to time their cultural identifications. A sense of communal solidarity emerging from collective social engagements also shapes and consolidates common identities. Also, the pro-socialist cultural ambience leads the red song singers to believe that a "red" cultural identity is shared by many and not necessarily "out of date" (Interview 11102011A, in Tianhe Park). One question that the red song singers need to answer, however, is why such a socialist cultural space remains to be important even in the post-reform Chinese society. To justify the pro-socialist cultural identity and the cultural ambience in the singing sites, the singers have developed sophisticated narratives and discourses by linking the red songs to their lived experiences. Hence the space of public singing also provides an arena in which new and reconstructed understandings of important social and historical processes are assembled and narrated. These new narratives contain not only traces of previous ideological education in the Maoist era, but also active interpretations of the present social conditions.

Red songs, in the meantime, provide a proper cultural terrain for this process of re-imagination and re-negotiation. As I have argued earlier, the red songs constitute the discursive foundation of the grassroots *public* situated in the singing sites. This public is founded less on collective interests and substantive political projects than shared discourses and meanings. On the one hand, the meanings and narratives which red songs bear echo the singers' political identities. Thus red song singing is employed as the mechanism of

expression which is essential to the formation of any public. On the other hand, red songs also regulate political identities and delineate the discursive boundaries of them. It is the discursive contours established in red songs that make political attitudes and identities concrete and intelligible. The cultural experience of singing prompts the singers to reflect upon and respond to those songs and to construct their own narratives of various historical epochs by drawing cultural resources from those red songs. As the content analysis has shown, red songs are not inert containers of abstract ideological ideas. Rather, they feature concrete themes, speak to historical realities and are thus subject to active and productive interpretations against particular social and historical contexts. Hence red songs can be actively and productively used and appropriated to reproduce and reframe the red song singers' pro-socialist political identities, which in turn consolidates the socialist cultural ambience in the public space of singing.

The question at stake then is what are the political discourses that red song singing has actually given rise to? What field of knowledge have these discourses constituted as the ideological contour that undergirds this grassroots public? Interestingly, the discourses articulated via red songs singing are positioned in diverse and even contradictory relations to the political legitimacy of the Chinese state in the post-reform era. The following analyses will reveal the potentials of the pro-socialist ambience in the public singing sites to both re-assert and question the political hegemony of the post-reform Chinese state, gesturing towards both the historical continuity and discontinuity between the pre-reform and post-reform eras.

### **Red song singing as space of political allegiance**

From an outsider's point of view, the spectacle of red song singing seems to showcase the singers' conformity to the political hegemony of the party-state regime through actively and cordially performing a state-endorsed popular culture. Indeed, this sense of heartfelt political allegiance to the party-state regime is the foremost cultural message which the singers are keen to convey to the outsiders:

This space is for us to express our loyalty to the country and to the Party. What we want to display here is the "mainstream" ideologies and political ideas in a China led by the Communist Party. Socialism is the foundation of the Party and the singing of red songs should certainly be interpreted as the manifestation of the people support for the Party. (Interview 22102011A, in Baiyun Moutain)

A pre-established identity as socialist people is the primary force which prompted the singers to produce and maintain a pro-socialist cultural ambience in the sites of red song singing.



This socialist cultural identity, in the cases of most red song singers, dates back to the intensive, almost ceaseless mass ideological education in the Maoist era. It constitutes the principal orientational framework for them to articulate political discourses and narratives even in face of the rapid cultural changes in the post-reform era. In the meantime, the intensive experience of singing red songs also works to further consolidate those singers' pro-socialist identity. Old red songs are re-interpreted in contemporary social contexts. Recently produced red songs are juxtaposed with older ideological meanings, extending the registers of political legitimacy and political allegiance to new frontiers of meaning-making. In the public spaces of singing, red songs as a popular culture actively lived and encountered possess potential powers to regulate and discipline the discourses and knowledge produced by their practitioners. Through intensive, repetitive experiences of red songs, those singers are inclined to align themselves with the cultural hegemony contained in the red songs.

To some extent, the continuous practice and renewal of the pro-socialist identity emerges out of the red song singers' collective inability to articulate alternative cultural affiliations. Their reluctance in developing alternative ideological frameworks for the constitution of cultural identities prompts the singers to actively rebuild the narratives of their own life experiences and connect them to the meanings in the red songs to render their political allegiance to the party-state more concrete and understandable. The pro-socialist cultural space is thus justified by configuring a politically "correct and secure" identity:

Most people who sing here are between the ages of 50 and 80. We went through that period when everything was about Chairman Mao and socialism. That is the way we lived out a large part of our life. Now at my age, I have no interest to change this mentality. What other mental attachment can I develop anyway? (Interview 15102011B, in Baiyun Mountain)

As I discussed earlier, due to survival of socialism in dominant political discourses, "old" red songs still serve the political legitimacy of the party state. The Communist Party in the present – from an institutional point of view – is not radically different from the one in the Maoist time. Thus for many singers the presence of Maoist red songs in post-reform public social life is not necessarily interpreted as "out of date" or "out of place". The themes such as communist revolution, liberation and anti-imperial struggles in the red songs are elicited from time to time by the singers to confirm the political legitimacy of the Communist Party in the *present*. Those red songs almost exclusively date back to the Maoist era, and highlight the establishment of a socialist political and economic system as a radical break with the regimes of imperialism, feudalism and capitalism previously dominating the Chinese society before the founding of the People's Republic. What those red songs speak to is the

institutionalization of socialism, a socialist command economy and a sophisticated collective welfare system. By drawing from meanings and narratives in the red songs, the party-state is portrayed as both the defender of national independence and a political hero who built up a socialist political, social and economic structure on the ruins of an oppressive and exploitative regime.

But the political legitimacy of socialism is not merely confirmed by abstract ideological ideas contained in the red songs. On the contrary, it is always connected to concrete social and economic transformations in the material domains. The cultural symbols drawn from the red songs are made concrete and intelligible only when linked to the singers' lived experiences of the Maoist era. In those recollections of the Maoist era, the earlier decades of the People's Republic are viewed as a time when a hierarchy of class was replaced by socialist egalitarianism, and an exploitative mode of production gave place to a from-cradle-to-grave socialist welfare system. Red songs which feature socialism, Maoism and liberation highlight the egalitarian ideal in a socialist society and the relative economic equality amongst its social members. Also, the egalitarian ideal was often expressed in the red songs through the rhetoric referring to all social members as equally "masters of the country". Many red song singers, especially those who personally experienced the transition to socialism, recalled experiences of their families which were previously the subordinated class in the society but gained access to substantial social welfare under the leadership of the party-regime:

My family was from the rural area. Before the Liberation in 1949, we were tenant peasants doing agricultural work on the land owned by a rich landlord. Most of our products were taken by him in the form of rent. Our life was pathetic. After 1949, the landlord's land was expropriated by the socialist government and redistributed to us. After that our life got gradually improved. (Interview 101011B, in Baiyun Mountain)

Signifiers to "liberation" and "revolution" constitute the centre around which narratives in many of these red songs are framed. For example, one of the most popular red songs dating back to the Maoist time builds up an affective link between the subversion of established power hierarchy and the vision of "new life":

*Sing a song to the Party (chang zhi shan'ge gei dang ting)*

Sing a song to the Party,  
And I compare the Party to my mother,  
But my mother only gave birth to my flesh,  
The Party, her glory shines upon my heart!

In the old days,  
I was whipped cruelly by the oppressors,  
My mother could do nothing but weep,  
But the Party, she summoned me to the Revolution  
To strike back against the enemies, with their own whips!

.....

Yet, the singers' affectively charged recollections of the Maoist era are not at all coherent and one-dimensional. In the sites of red song singing, it is not uncommon to hear the singers critically commenting on the economic stagnancy and frugality in the Maoist time, as well as the citizens' inability to question and contest dominant political ideas. Many singers mock at themselves from time to time as "foolish", "mindless" and "unnecessarily nostalgic". The catastrophic Cultural Revolution, unsurprisingly, is also a collective trauma which is intrinsically woven into the negotiation of a socialist cultural identity.

Ironically, the red song singers' critical reflection of the Maoist time helps to extend the political legitimacy of the party-state into the post-reform era. The revolutionary struggles led by Mao and other early communist leaders, in the red song singers' narratives, paved the way for the later communist leaders to bring economic prosperity to the people in a post-reform context. In the post-reform era the political legitimacy of the party-state emerges out of its timely correction of the political extremism in the Cultural Revolution and its success in restructuring economic relations to booster unprecedented economic growth. It is no wonder, in this sense, that the singers also embrace those "new" red songs which place their focuses largely on the themes of economic development and a national space which can effectively accommodate the "new and good life" of its people:

The Party has demonstrated its ability to bring happiness and better material life to its people. You can see how fast China is developing during the past decades since the Reform and Opening. The material aspect of people's life is so much enriched and now you enjoy all types of commodities in a free market. We certainly thank the Party for bring us such a good life. (Interview 30122011B, in Tianhe Park)

This image of "good life", interestingly, also bears certain legacy of the Maoist welfare system. Many red song singers are retirees who receive a considerable amount of pension welfare from the state which supports their life after retirement. China's retirement pension system was initially established in the Maoist era and fortunately has not been abandoned by the post-reform Chinese state. The security endowed by the socialist-style pension system, combined with the enriched material life in the post-reform period, significantly contributed to the political allegiance of the singers, which is further confirmed by the themes in the red songs such as the Party's good leadership, socialism, and economic development. As many red song singers suggest, the socialist pension system has granted them a high degree of



financial security which allows them the leisurely time in the Park. They, in turn, feel keenly a moral responsibility to use the red songs to express their political allegiance to the party-state regime:

I feel the time nowadays is very good. We have retired and been enjoying a generous pension without the need to work. I thank the Party for this. Because of this institution we can retire and enjoy the leisurely time. Now life is much better than before and it is all owed to socialism and the party. (Interview 16102011B, in Baiyun Mountain)

### **Red song singing as space of critical reflection**

Political loyalty, however, is not the only cultural meaning which is played out in the space of red song singing. After all, the bulk of red songs are representative of the “most socialist” period under the rule of Mao and at odds with many prevalent cultural ideologies and beliefs in the post-reform era. The cultural symbols of liberation, socialist egalitarianism and non-exploitative collective economy sit rather uneasily with the ascending logics of market, commodity and profit-making in the post-reform context. For many outsiders, the site of red song singing is a space of weird nostalgia fundamentally distanced from the cultural *zeitgeists* of the younger generations. Given that in post-reform China people are less and less interested in publicly expressing socialist ideas, the space of red song singing – with all its flavors of socialism – appears to be culturally “out of place” in many aspects. Indeed, even the red song singers depict themselves as the “culturally marginal” in the post-socialist era:

Our singing events actually attract many younger passers-by to linger a while. But surely most of them just view it as a spectacular show and do not understand why socialism is important to us. They often laugh at us. Some others show good respect for our taste but obviously cannot understand us. It is not surprising: the Cultural Revolution has destroyed the image of Chairman Mao and people nowadays do not like “red culture”. (Interview 18102011A, in Tianhe Park)

How to discursively legitimize this pro-socialist cultural ambience in a not-so-receptive cultural milieu is a task that red song singers continuously face. Interestingly, the red song singers re-assert their attachment to orthodox socialist ideologies by critically reflecting, if not directly challenging, the hegemonic political discourses endorsed by the post-reform Chinese state and also by questioning the prevalent cultural beliefs and logics in the post-reform Chinese society. The red songs are abstracted as the symbol of a past Maoist time which inspires collective remembrance and reflective thinking. In doing so, the red song singers actively counter the official discourses which depict capitalist commodity relations as the only possible entry into social and economic development. As a result, the state-endorsed

ideologies of market, economic growth and development, as well as the cultural hegemony of contemporary Chinese state, is forcefully questioned and contested. To use a past Communist Party to criticize a present Communist Party, eventually, consolidates the singers' perception of the radical cultural and ideological discontinuity between the pre-reform and post-reform Chinese society. It is through questioning and contesting the post-reform party-state regime that this pro-socialist grassroots public incubates counterpublic potentialities.

The focal point around which the red song singers' critical thinking of the present develops is the ascendance of the logic of money in an increasingly capitalist Chinese society. In their narratives, money has become the principal axis around which social relations and social moralities are defined in a post-reform context. It is money which now determines one's social status and his/her place in a social structure. The merit of work and economically productive time is now measured by the exchange value which they can generate. Besides, the intensifying economic and cultural differentiation between the rich and the poor in the post-reform Chinese society also raises concerns amongst many red song singers.

Most of the red song singers who share these concerns are not victims of the market transition themselves, but a pro-socialist nostalgia compels them to discursively counter the prevalent logic of money by reconstructing the image of the pre-reform era. The old red songs, therefore, provide a proper discursive space from which the singers can draw cultural symbols and narratives. Again, the cultural symbols of the egalitarian ideal, the end of economic exploitation, socialism and Chairman Mao are employed to support this discursive reconstruction. For example, one of the red songs that the singers refer to from time to time expresses explicitly this egalitarian socialist ideal:

*Socialism is good (shehui zhuxi hao)*

Socialism is good,  
Socialism is good.  
In a socialist country,  
It is the people who hold the high status.  
The reactionaries have been defeated,  
The imperialists have escaped,

.....

The Party is good,  
The Party is good.  
The Party is the people's good leader.  
It has done what it promised,  
It has devoted whole-heartedly to serve the people,

Thus the Maoist era is described almost unanimously as a time when there was no economic inequality and every social member enjoyed basically the same degree of well-being. A state-commanded network of wealth distribution determined that individuals were not personally involved in the game for social resources, and the difference between the rich and the poor could be minimized through the working of state mechanisms. Therefore, the pursuit of money was not dominant in the structuring of social relations between social members. As a result, many “sins of money” could be effectively avoided. In the red song singers’ narratives, the Maoist China appeared to be a utopia-like place in which there was no theft, no robbery and no political corruption. Social members were not keen on pursuing personal wealth, and it was a time when people did not need to lock their door even when sleeping:

Believe it or not, in Chairman Mao’s time you did not need to lock your door when you slept at night. Simply no one would break into your house to steal anything from you. Everyone had a good moral sensitivity. Nowadays, you need to put several locks in your door and you need to apply all those techniques to protect the security of your house. We did not need to waste time on those stupid things in Chairman Mao’s time. (Interview 16102011A, in Tianhe Park)

Thus the pursuit of personal interests was not the primary force which encouraged people to act or work in the Maoist era. It was a time when “the hospital would take good care of you even when you had no money to pay your treatment” (Interview 07012012A, in Yuexiu Park). Due to the lack of the money logic, the value of human labour and devotion was not measured according to the exchange value they could generate. Many red song singers recalled the heart-warming moments of mutual help or mutual support between social members, always without paybacks in the form of money:

Once some friends and I, all young girls, walked by a crop field and found the peasants were too busy to finish their work. We then joined those peasants without any hesitation. No one asked why we should. We worked till late at night. That was the spirit of that remote time. I can promise what I tell you now are all truth: that was exactly the emotional bonding between people at that time. (Interview 16102011B, in Tianhe Park)

The lack of passion for personal interests was also related to the spirit of voluntarism expressed and applauded in many old red songs. In those representations, socialist workers always devoted all their energies for the collective well-being of the country and the people

without any consideration for personal gains. For example, one such song portrays the image of a typical socialist worker in the petroleum industry:

*I dedicate the petroleum to the motherland (wo wei zuguo xian shiyou)*

Our motherland is picturesque,  
And our industrial construction is as fast as riding in a horse.  
I am so honoured to be a petroleum worker,  
Adventuring in the entire land with my aluminium helmet

.....

I dedicate petroleum to the motherland.  
Where there is petrol,  
It will be my home.

.....

Chairman Mao's words guide us,  
We will build up our country with our own sweat and blood

.....

I dedicate petroleum to the motherland,  
The petrol flows deeply in my heart!

Those songs resonate strongly amongst the singers, especially those who previously worked as socialist industrial workers. In their narratives, the stereotypical image of a socialist worker in the Maoist era was one who was fully devoted to his/her work without ever comparing his/her workload with others or calculating the economic rewards that he/she deserved in proportion to his/her output. People worked together for the common purpose of building up a prosperous socialist country which could benefit every social member:

People nowadays cannot even understand this spirit, because they believe only a high salary can motivate them to bear such a large workload. Workers in the Maoist time were not actually working; they were sacrificing. People did not care how much money they could earn from their work. The workers in the petroleum industry, who appeared in the red songs most frequently, were the precise example of this spirit. (Interview 10102011B, in Baiyun Mountain)

As a result, many singers tend to interpret the Maoist era as a time when people enjoyed a high level of mental satisfaction and happiness despite notable material shortages. It is not read as a hopeless time with nothing but desperate economic stagnancy and naïve political radicalism, as current state discourses describe. Rather, it was a time during which authentic community life was sustained and human productivity was inspired. The singers highlight the potential of this socialist spirit to motivate human agency to contribute to national development. The red song singers also tend to interpret the economic stagnancy in the Maoist time as the outcome of ceaseless political mobilizations and movements, rather than an intrinsic structural inability to foster economic vitality:

The poverty in the Maoist time was only one side of the story. Despite many difficulties we managed to develop several large oil fields and built up industries which enabled us to produce cars, ships and even airplanes. We launched our satellites and tested our atomic bombs. Certainly it was the Cultural Revolution which was responsible for the problems in the economic development. (Interview 30122011A, in Tianhe Park)

To highlight these utopian imaginaries, the red song singers certainly need to reconcile their reconstruction of the Maoist time with the “darker” sides of economic underperformance and political frenzy. Although those “bad” aspects of the Maoist era are never denied by the singers, they have nonetheless adopted a fairly passive stance in actually engaging with these issues. In their narratives, the past is past – it can be forgotten and it can be forgiven. After all, the party-state has revised its political doctrines; and the past, therefore, should not be viewed as a counterproductive cultural burden for the present. It seems that many red song singers tend to deliberately sidestep the memories of economic frugality and political oppression in the Maoist time and instead romanticize that period to reconstruct and reflect upon the present. The utopian image of the Maoist time constructed by them, therefore, cannot be taken as absolute “realities”. However, the ways in which these singers actively appropriate the meanings and symbols contained in the red songs to counter the cultural hegemony of the discourses undergirding China’s transition to capitalism are still telling. The narratives developed by the singers forcefully contest the official rhetoric of the contemporary party-state which reifies market economy and capitalist commodity relations as the inevitable road for Chinese socialism, thus questioning the political legitimacy of the current state regime itself.

### **Cultivating new counterpublic? Grassroots Leftist activism**

Although the singers’ overt expressions to the outsiders are rare, the site of red song singing is certainly not an enclosed space. The pro-socialist cultural ambience also encourages outsider viewers and passers-by to reflect upon the Maoist past as well as the appropriate place of orthodox socialism in contemporary Chinese society. In Tianhe Park, the nostalgic ambience of socialism has attracted a number of grassroots New Leftist activists to the site of singing for disseminating anti-capitalist political ideas and encouraging the singers to boycott Genetically Modified (GM) Food. Those Leftist activists are aligned with two websites: “Mao Flag” (*Mao Zedong qizhi wang*) and “Utopia” (*wuyou zhixiang*)<sup>18</sup>, both of which are established for propagating orthodox ideologies of socialism and Maoism. These

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<sup>18</sup> Both websites have been shut down by the Chinese government since 6 April, 2012.

two websites are run by public intellectuals, university-based scholars and even retired government officials who advocate China's return to a Maoist political economy. They also play an important role in the rise of the so-called "New Left" in China's political and intellectual spheres. The long-term aim of those activists is to end the market economy in China and revive the authentic socialist economic and social organization to address the pressing issues such as social inequality and the dominance of money logic. Most of those activists are from working class or lower-middle class background and many of them tend to portray themselves as the "losers" in the post-reform market economy.

The ages of these activists range from early 20s to early 40s; and for most of them, personal memory of the Maoist era is at best thin and fragmented. Hence for many of the activists, the ideal of socialism is anchored only in old red songs. The space of spontaneous red song singing is described by them as the only place in contemporary China in which they can imagine and experience "a return to the authentic socialist thoughts and ethics" (Interview 07012012B, in Tianhe Park). It is a space outside the official discourses of the contemporary party-state and serves as the political forum in which grassroots social members' dissatisfaction with capitalist economic relations can be expressed.

The red song singers, who actively live and practice a pro-socialist cultural ambience, are automatically seen by the activists as the perfect targets for preaching anti-capitalist political ideas. Those singers, as the activists describe, are firmly attached to orthodox socialist ideals and more responsive to Leftist political claims. They are thought to be less subsumed under the cultural hegemony of market economy and possess the agency to envisage alternative political possibilities. In the activists' words, their campaign in the space of red song singing is a process of "enlightenment" – an educative project for further inspiring people's reflective thinking when a radical revolution is still less than plausible:

Red songs reflect the Maoist time in the 1950s and 1960s. By comparing that period with the present, we can find out what are actually the problems nowadays and inspire the people to change their supportive attitudes towards market economy. All should start with singing red songs. In contemporary conditions it is still not very possible to mobilize a large-scale revolution or something alike. (Interview 07012012B, in Tianhe Park)

This space of red song singing, on the other hand, creates an opportunity for the activists to re-vision the Maoist China as a historical epoch which was "real", "energetic" and "lively". In the first place, the activists have actively adopted the narratives reconstructed by the singers, which counter the official discourses of socialism's inability to foster social and economic progress. On the other hand, the red song singers' rich recollections of the Maoist time further affirm the activists' belief that a socialist political economy and a socialist

societal organization are not merely romantic political ideals. The lived experiences of the singers make the site of singing a space in which younger activists can actually envisage possibilities of alternative futures and non-capitalist social relations:

We intend to excavate the images of the Maoist time from those red songs. Many singers here are old, retired people. They went through that period and they have attachment to that time. They know it was real, and they know a socialist world was once realized in China. (Interview 07012012B, in Tianhe Park)

On the other hand, the red songs also provide a discursive space in which this newly emergent counterpublic can be anchored. Thus many activists express a romantic emotional attachment to the cultural ambience in the singing sites. The sites of red song singing, as they describe, are the places in which they can both find a receptive audience and be educated by authentic socialist people. Leftist activism in Tianhe Park is mainly in the form of leafleting and propagating for the boycott of GM food. The dichotomization of socialism/capitalism is a pivotal dimension in the activists' interpretation of the proliferation of GM food in China. The red songs, on the other hand, provide a comprehensive representational repertoire with which both socialism and GM food can be understood and discursively constructed. It is not to say that the activists' political attitudes are formed solely through drawing from red songs. Nonetheless, the activists' representations of GM food echo well the standard Maoist worldviews expressed in those songs. Most notably, the introduction of GM foods into China is described as the manifestation of US capitalism's ambition to dominate the market of China. Drawing from Maoist representations of American capitalism and imperialism, the activists contend that GM food is introduced to China in favour of American business interests, and for the purpose of controlling the economic resources of China and eventually exterminating the Chinese nation with foods which are potentially harmful to health. Certainly, for these activists the dominance of US-led global capitalism can be realized only by allying with corrupted Chinese politicians and officials who manoeuvring capitalist economic relations for maintaining monopolistic control over economic resources and social wealth. Similar to the red song singers, the Leftist activists also consider capitalist economic relations and private property as the primary factors which account for the ascendancy of the logic of money:

The biggest problem in current Chinese society is privatization. Socialism should be an institution which privileges collective or state ownership. But everything has been changed since 1978. Along with privatization, people's greed for pursuing private interests has been summoned out. People are becoming selfish now and what they care about is how to make more money. The current China is a perfect frontier for the USA to expand

its political hegemony and to control us economically. (Interview 13112011A, in Tianhe Park)

The activists' anti-capitalist political attitudes motivate them to envision the ways in which the dominant power relations in contemporary China can be contested and subverted. For example, according to these activists one solution to the dominance of capitalism in the current Chinese society is mass political mobilization which aims to fundamentally subvert the established relations of power. The pro-capitalist party-state, in this sense, must be radically restructured through the revolutionary acts of the people. In the spaces of red song singing, there is a small amount of songs emergent from the mass political movements in the Cultural Revolution; and most of these songs featured Mao as the mentor who would lead the people to fight for the ultimate emancipation. Although most ordinary red song singers deliberately ignore the immediate historical context of those songs, the cultural symbols in them are highly favoured by the activists and often employed to configure the image of a collective past which can be used as the orientational framework for present actions. Allied with these ideologically radical red songs, the activists also tend to romanticize and extol the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution is re-imagined as a time when Mao led the people to fight heroically against the clandestine sects in the Party-state which aimed to establish a bureaucratic government and to secure privileged access to social wealth. In this representation, Mao is romantically depicted as the "people's leader" who attempted to crush down the government that he established himself in order to challenge the entrenched structure of power. The Cultural Revolution is portrayed by the activists as an unorthodox temporality in which predominant orders and power relations were thoroughly subverted. It created such a time-space that it was the rule for the powerless, the grassroots to challenge, even destroy those bureaucrats and politicians in power:

During the Cultural Revolution, you did not need to care about the political status of anyone. If the government could not meet the demands of the people, people just crushed it and pulled the officials down from their places. In a factory, it was normal for the Head to be removed from office by the workers. To fight the powerful with your hands, that was the norm in Cultural Revolution. Now in a private factory, do you dare to do it? You will simply be fired if you challenge the boss! (Interview 13112011B, in Tianhe Park)

It is not the aim of this chapter to discuss in detail whether the activists' accounts of the Cultural Revolution are right or wrong, accurate or distorted. Obviously, the activists exaggerated the grassroots people's political agency in the Cultural Revolution and ignored that for most ordinary Chinese people, the collective memories of Cultural Revolution are more about draconic political persecution rather than grassroots empowerment. As a result,



even most red song singers feel uneasy about the activists' reconstructed accounts of the Cultural Revolution. What is noteworthy here, on the contrary, is that the activists' political attitudes and political claims resonate so well with the hegemonic cultural representations of Maoist era in the red songs. Red songs, in turn, provide certain orientational frameworks for the activists to understand the present and envisage alternative political possibilities. For the activists, the space of red song singing appears to a taken-for-granted place in which their political identity can be affirmed and their political attitudes expressed. It is in the case of the Leftist activism that we can snapshot the potential of the space of red song singing for the expression of overtly confrontational political claims and for the imagination of alternative, collective political futures.



**Figure 5-4 The activists' placards reading "GM rice will lead to infertility and sterilization"**

(Source: photograph by the author)

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have first employed a re-conceptualization of *public* to characterize grassroots social spaces of political expression and shared identity. Drawing from the classic theorizations of Habermas (1984; 1987; 1989) and Arendt (1958; 1973), this chapter views the public as a material or discursive space built upon shared discourses, meanings and

identities. But in the meantime, it is also argued that the notion of public does not need to be understood in terms of a universal sphere which forecloses marginal or alternative voices. Instead, this chapter argues that society is constituted of multiple publics, and any public is a social collective rendered concrete by bottom-up actions and engaged practices. A public is not pre-given. Rather, it is improvised and comes into being through common actions and discursive mutuality. Thus any public is potentially a counterpublic at the same time. It sits in diverse relations to the dominant ideologies and discourses. Armed with this perspective, this paper has charted a different course from classic political philosophies (Habermas, 1989; Arendt, 1973) to examine the ways in which a grassroots public is actually *formed*. On the one hand, it has analyzed the spaces and spatial practices through which political ideas, identities and attitudes are performed, negotiated and reproduced through active and participatory practices at the level of everyday life. On the other, it has also presented a detailed discussion of the political identities and discourses which are the cohesive forces of the grassroots public.

As this chapter has put earlier, the grassroots public is a social and cultural terrain which is not pre-defined, but actively made, lived and experienced. The cultural and social energies which ordinary red song singers have accumulated are manifested in their agency to mobilize the red songs as cultural and discursive resources. The shared political discourses and knowledge which lay down the foundation of the grassroots public examined in this chapter are heavily shaped and mediated by the consumption and reading of popular red songs. Without doubt, the red songs are assemblages of hegemonic cultural meanings which aim at the collective conformity of ordinary people to the party-state regime (Gramsci, 1971). Red songs have constituted a *field* of dominant ideas and knowledge which social members' cultural and political dispositions are always contingent on (Bourdieu, 1993; 1996a). But as Fiske (1989) and Grossberg (1997) have argued, popular cultural elements and practices activate formations of identities by utilizing proliferating cultural resources that emerge with the de-centering of official and hegemonic discourses. These singers develop their own structures of feelings (Williams, 1961) according to the social and historical conditions of both the present and the past. They transformed the sites of singing into meaningful social spaces written with both political allegiance and counter-hegemonic political identity.

The grassroots public examined in this chapter is deeply situated in the heterogeneous, ambiguous social identities and cultural discourses of the post-reform Chinese society. The space of red song singing opens up a window through which we can capture both the continuity and discontinuity between the pre-reform and post-reform Chinese societies (Dirik and Zhang, 1997; Su, 2011). On the one hand, the site of red song singing is a spatial

anchor with which the singers' cultural identity inherited from the Maoist mass ideological education can be reaffirmed, performed and re-negotiated. On the other, in discursively conceptualizing the site of red song singing as an unconventional, unorthodox cultural space in the post-reform Chinese society, the red song singers creatively position the Maoist past in opposition to the present and depict it as a time-space of definite moral superiority. In the space of red song singing, the political legitimacy of the party-state is re-asserted, yet simultaneously questioned. Both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic political discourses and identities are configured through the singers' multiple relations to the popular cultural meanings displayed in the red songs.

Yet, the political potential of collective red song singing is at best ambivalent. Since this grassroots public is built upon shared identities and cultural meanings rather than substantive political projects, the space of red song singing creates certain political momentum but in the meantime does not really encourage explicit political expressions. The site of red song singing should not be seen as a radical political space which is expected to contribute to drastic cultural or political changes. Outsider viewers and passers-by are rarely preached explicitly by the singers. For most outsiders, the public event of red song singing is simply a public spectacle performing the cultural imaginaries of another time-space. The state, on the other hand, is also less interested in policing the sites of red song singing, as the juxtaposition of both "old" and "new" red songs seems to confirm the taken-for-granted continuity of the party-state's political legitimacy in the post-reform era, while concealing largely the multiplicity and complexity in the singers' discursive productions. To some extent, the site of red song singing seems to be simply a space actively appropriated and practiced by a particular social group to legitimize a rediscovered cultural identity. Yet, the site of red song singing is a space saturated with rich political symbols, representations and meanings. It can be seen as a vast depository of identities, attitudes, symbols and discourses which social subjects can draw from to frame new political meanings and create new political possibilities. The presence of Leftist activists in the space of singing provides an example of its potential to inspire new political thinking and reflection. It is a space which creates the opportunities for the social subjects to actively and reflectively participate in the production of meanings. It is also a social and cultural arena which accommodates multiple processes of negotiation, appropriation and identity formation.

## **Chapter 6 No right to the street: motorcycle taxi, discourse production and the regulation of unruly mobility**

### **Introduction**

In the city of Guangzhou, taxi service provided by motorcycles accomplishes a unique form of short-distance, flexible transport mobility bridging major nodes in the state-run public transport network with under-connected urban neighbourhoods and workplaces. Operated almost exclusively by rural-to-urban migrants in the city, motorcycle taxis have played the central role in sustaining the livelihood of a marginalized urban social group. However, this particular form of informal, commodified urban transportation has become the object of strict state regulation since the use of motorcycles was outlawed wholesale by the municipal government of Guangzhou in the 2000s. Although this urban by-law failed to eradicate the business of motorcycle taxis altogether, it has nonetheless placed this particular form of urban mobility at the juncture of local political/legal power, disciplinary practices of the local police and the various terrains of discursive productions. The motorcycle taxi, as a result, has been re-positioned as the undesirable “other” to the hegemonic visions of street order and thus subject to the regulatory power of the state.

This chapter examines the regulation of motorcycle taxis. In line with the arguments which I have put forward in Chapter 2, this chapter is used to elucidate my point of view that regulation does not simply lead to the denial of the social and political significance of space. Rather, regulation creates crucial moments for us to understand how space is implicated in the changing conceptions of citizenship and rights. The social and political significance of public space does not come to its demise with the employment of regulation. Instead, it is precisely through the enactment of regulatory regimes that we can glimpse how the reconfiguration of spatial relations is the constituent element, rather than simply the outcome, of social relations, power structures and cultural meanings. How can regulation of public space be viewed as the process in which new visions of publicness are produced and normativized? This chapter attempts to engage with this question, and further destabilizes the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion as Chapter 4 has already done.

To ground the empirical materials in this chapter in a broader theoretical context, this chapter employs an analytical point of entry built from recent debates on the politics of mobility and interrogates its relation to the disciplining of urban streets as public space. This chapter starts from an overview of recent studies on the discursive production of mobile practices. It places its focus on the ways in which dominant knowledge and ideological

meanings delineate the right to urban space, constitute rationalities of governmental practices, and shape social actors' identities and subject positions. The regulation of public space emerges from these constructed and normativized discursive regimes. This chapter points out that both motorcycle mobility and the motorcycle taxi are socially produced categories made visible and intelligible through social programmes to ground them in a terrain of constructed knowledge. It conceptualizes the outlawing of motorcycle mobility as a practice of statecraft borne out of complex representational strategies and the production of intricate discourses. It also argues that the production of morally charged representations and knowledge catalyzes and shapes the spatialization of regulatory power and the enactment of spatial barriers. For this reason, this chapter will also examine the street-level regulatory practices of the local state, and how these practices result in the restructuring of social relations and local state power.

The regulation of motorcycle taxis raises a set of questions concerning what can be counted as orderly and efficient use of public space on the one hand, and the historical contingency of citizenship and right to the city on the other (Marston and Mitchell, 2004; Lefebvre, 1996). Arguably, the broad context of the regulation of motorcycle taxis is the emerging cosmopolitan modernity of major Chinese cities and the rising regime of neoliberal urban governance. Along with these processes, initiatives of place-making and image-making are frequently privileged over the orthodox socialist ideal of egalitarianism (He and Wu, 2009). To render the public street a visible object of regulatory practices and place it at the centre of our understandings of everyday life, knowledge and discourses play the essential role in drawing the boundaries between the civilized and the undesirable.

Armed with this analytical perspective, the empirical analyses in this chapter examine respectively three distinct, yet interrelated spatialities in the production of the motorcycle taxis as an entangled terrain of knowledge, state power and spatial practices. First, it investigates the spatiality of discursive production, in which the motorcycle taxi is rendered an intelligible object of governance through the construction of knowledge and truths. Second, it examines the ways in which dominant discourses and representations shape both the police mentality and police actions. In Guangzhou, the police officers' self-position as the defenders of order and civility turns the everyday encounters between state power and motorcycle taxi drivers into a ceaseless struggle "between the heroes and the villains". The local police's high motivation in designing and updating techniques of regulation cannot be fully accounted for by the political logics of a traditional managerial state. Last but not least, this chapter also probes into the spatiality of subject formation in which motorcycle taxi drivers navigate their experience of space and mobility, and position their identity and

marginality within a broader framework of dominant knowledge and the relations of uneven social power.

### **Public space regulation: mobilities, discursive government and local state power**

Public space is not simply the physical container which social and cultural practices are placed into or removed from. Rather, the production, construction and imagination of public space are deeply imbricated in the social practices and processes which it presumptively “contains”. In this case study, it is the practices of urban mobilities which have activated the reconstruction of a public social terrain. The concept of mobility extends beyond the abstract, empty movement from Point A to Point B. On the contrary, mobility enables opportunities of intensive encounter, contestation and negotiation (Urry, 2000). Therefore it reconstitutes social relations and also shapes the dynamic of political struggles (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Adey (2010) contends that mobilities are always positioned in relation to something else or somebody, and they involve the multiple ways in which we form and make sense of relations with others. Following this argument, this chapter engages with the *politics* of mobility and concerns the limits, constraints and power dynamics which determine whether or not particular forms of mobile practices are considered legitimate in specific social, political and institutional conditions. Mobility is viewed as a visible public sphere which accommodates ongoing contestation as well as a crucial terrain on which people and meanings are handled and managed.

At the centre of the contestation over mobility is the fact that different people are positioned in very different ways to the right to mobility (Adey, 2010). While certain mobile practices are considered to be appropriate and endowed with full access to social resources, others are thoroughly restricted and regulated. The project in this chapter is particularly informed by the studies on the discursive production of mobile practices and how discourses justify the regulation of particular mobilities. As Adey (2010) has argued, mobility is intrinsically ideological and deeply embedded in the webs of discourses and representations. In the production of normative discourses and narratives, not all mobilities are considered equally appropriate, civilized or desirable (Cresswell, 2001). There is always a set of knowledge which is claimed, often by more powerful social groups, to reflect the “nature” and “realities” of given mobile practices. Mobilities are always loaded with ideological and symbolic meanings circulated within particular discursive communities (Cresswell, 2001;

2006; Adey, 2006). For example, while certain forms of mobilities conjure up imaginations of romantic nomadism and unfettered individual freedom (Urry, 2000; Cresswell, 1993), others may be associated with chaos, incivility or even threat (Cresswell, 1999; 2006). Kaplan's (1996) discussion on the romanticization of exile in high modernity and Cresswell's (2001) study of the moral panic over the placeless tramps in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century America are illustrative of the positive or negative meanings and connotations associated with specific mobile practices.

Individuals or groups differentially positioned in the social hierarchy may produce radically distinct representations and geographical imaginations of mobilities. The social and cultural significances of various mobile practices are not pre-given, but constructed, codified and institutionalized through the interplays of ideologies and discourses (Cresswell, 2001). Meanwhile, the production of ideological meanings and discourses is always socially mediated. Mobilities are sites of ongoing struggles in historically and geographically specific processes of social formation (Cresswell, 2006; 2010). It is often the reconfiguration of social contexts and social relations that potentially catalyzes the discursive reconstruction of mobilities. Categories of mobile practices are constituted within the geometries of social power which determine why certain forms of mobilities are excluded from the hegemonic visions of civilization, culture and space (Manderscheid, 2009; Jensen, 2011).

Discursive production of different mobile practices can be translated to a dialectics between mobility and immobility. Paradoxically, the enhancement of mobility is always-already premised on the production of certain forms of immobility. The movements of objects and social members do not take place automatically, but involve the struggles with various constraints and are embedded in processes of control and management. In particular, cultural norms, discursive regimes and institutional arrangements which favour the mobilities of certain social groups may end up in the demobilization of other social members. This is precisely the point in Cresswell's (2010, p. 21) trenchant argument that "one person's speed is another person's slowness"; and "some move in such a way that others get fixed in place". In most circumstances, it is one's place in the structure of society which conditions and constrains his/her opportunities to be mobile. As Urry (2008) and Adey (2010) have contended, people from different strata of a hierarchical society possess fairly uneven levels of the right to mobile practices.

Bearing in mind a focus on discourses, ideological meanings and knowledge, this chapter engages with three interrelated terrains of inquiry to the regulation of public space and the multiple social, cultural and spatial processes involved which deserve close scrutiny. All of the three terrains enable us to see the ways in which the social and political significance of

public space manifests itself in the unfolding of the contestation over space. First of all, contestation and struggle over public space entails the reproduction of regulatory legitimacy and thereby social power. In this study, social power upholding regulatory practices is not vested in bounded, pre-established political authority, but stems from the diverse arrays of ideological meanings, knowledge and discursive practices. Indeed, it is one of the major theoretical contributions offered by the studies of mobility politics as it suggests that regulation does not take place naturally, but penetrates into the configurations of discursive and cultural fabrics. Therefore this chapter is interested in capturing the working of the Chinese state not in terms of absolute authoritarian domination but with specific references to the discourses, constructed knowledge and geographical imaginations which justify regulatory practices and also produce *soft* political power in managing an increasingly diversifying Chinese urban society. It is assumed that the political legitimacy of particular public policy originates, at least partly, from the state's position to speak more authoritative voices and produce dominant cultural representations, rather than absolute and abstract political authority.

To some extent, this analytical perspective echoes social sciences' recent engagement with the Foucauldian theory of governmentality which focuses on the processes of *problematization* and *knowledge production* in governmental practices (Foucault, 1991a; Rose, 1999; Miller and Rose, 2008). Governmentality is concerned with the ways in which a regime of truths is discursively constituted in order to justify rationales of state programs and actions (Gordon, 1991). In this model of political power, the state plays a disciplinary, as well as pedagogical role in leading, orienting and shaping "decent" or "appropriate" conducts of individual social members in the name of achieving "good society" and improving collective interests (Dean, 2010; Lemke, 2002; Huxley, 2006; Rose, 2000). To produce norms of appropriate choices, desires, aspirations, wants and lifestyles, a regime of constructed knowledge needs to be established to define social "problems" and configure specific government rationalities. In this project, problems of the society are not pre-given social realities, but rendered visible and intelligible through the discursive constitution of "truths" (Miller and Rose, 2008). It is always by framing such problems within a shared language and representational space that a consensus can be reached that such problems do indeed exist and calls for state intervention (Foucault, 1991b).

Second, discourses of and contestation over public space shape political action and enable the practices of statecraft to be oriented alongside diverse rationalities and logics. If the politics of mobility implies establishing discursive boundaries between "good" and "bad" mobilities, it is often translated into concrete practices of street-level policing and regulation.



Recent studies on the regulation of public space have forcefully analyzed the ways in which public space is rendered the primary arena for the assertion of dominant definitions of social order and civility. With diverse practices of zoning, policing, disciplining and punishment, those who are deemed as uncivilized, disorderly and troublesome “others” are frequently excluded from the use of public space (Flusty, 2001; Mitchell, 2003a; Bannister *et al.*, 2006). The aspirations of urban elites for order and civility have severely sabotaged the right to urban spaces for the homeless, panhandlers and other marginalized social groups. The increasingly stringent hand of state power on the management of everyday urban space echoes the rise of what is termed the “revanchist urbanism” in the Western context (Smith, 1996). With such a reconfiguration of urban politics, the practice of government is predicated upon a plethora of institutional infrastructures serving an extended sphere of discipline or even the purification of urban spaces (MacLeod, 2009; 2011; MacLeod and Ward, 2009).

More importantly, the production of particular discourses, knowledge and rationales enables street-level practices of regulatory power to be configured in different ways from the Fordist managerial state. On the one hand, although marginalized social groups are nonetheless the primary victims of these regulatory regimes, the rhetoric in urban policies can effectively sidestep any specific reference to the questions of power, politics, injustice and right. Instead, discourses underlying those policy orientations are often framed into purely *technological* lexicons (Blomley, 2011). By rhetorically re-defining public space as merely functional space designated for purposeful, utilitarian actions, practices of state power can disarticulate the regulation of public space from explicit references to the vocabularies of citizenship and individual rights (Blomley, 2007a; 2007b; 2010). On the other hand, in the new paradigms of spatial governing state power now operate alongside new concerns and sensitivities. Urban policy frameworks are often oriented towards normative moral judgments of right/wrong, order/disorder, rather than the structural factors and institutional failures which have produced certain social groups’ collective inability to adopt more “decent” or “respectable” ways of living (Mooney, 2009; Slater, 2011). State police power in this form, as Blomley (2011) has argued, does not target upon identifiable consequences of harmful behaviours, but governs in the interest of more nebulous and abstract ideas, such as public good, social order and efficiency. As Beckett and Herbert (2010) pointedly contend, such regimes of disciplining target upon and illegalize specific behaviours or statuses of social members, rather than the actual consequences of disorder. They explicitly define differentiated citizenships, enforce zones of exclusion, and enable the exercise of police power and state power to monitor various aspects of mundane everyday

life. Also, rationales of governmental practices are usually concretized into new laws, by-laws or other forms of legal codes (Rose and Valverde, 1998; Delaney, 1998). In the case of Guangzhou, the particular urban by-law concerned here is no more than a few sentences prohibiting explicitly the use of motorcycles. However, it can still be viewed as the site in which complex social discourses intersect and speak back to the configuration of power and social relations (Delaney, 1998).

Finally, the regulation of public space also involves the reconstruction of identities and subjectivities. The purpose of regulation may be the eradication of certain identities from a physically bounded territory. But if we delve deeper into the social, cultural and political processes of which regulatory practices are constitutive, it is not difficult to see that social members' identities have undergone complex renegotiations and reconstructions, rather than simply being inscribed into or removed from a physical landscape. Thus this chapter will also interrogate how motorcycle taxi drivers' social identity is constituted by dominant discourses and the spatialization of state regulatory power. Those taxi drivers respond in diverse ways to hegemonic visions about what are acceptable ways of mobility on the streets of a rapidly "modernizing" Chinese metropolis. While some dominant views and ideas are internalized into the negotiation of the self (Foucault, 1988), they also contest hegemonic vocabularies by evoking experiences grounded in everyday mobile practices. In particular, it will analyze how a subaltern identity is articulated amongst motorcycle taxi drivers as a result of their negotiation and encounters with dominant discourses and street-level police power. If subalternity, as Spivak (1988) argues, can be understood in terms of the absence of one's own voice in the dominant structure of social power, this identity is deeply imprinted in motorcycle drivers' understandings of their marginal position in the social structure, and rooted in their lament over the structural inability to adopt more "decent" and "respectable" ways of life.

### **Motorcycle taxi as informal urban mobility**

The motorcycle taxi refers to a motorcycle serving as the vehicle for commodified transport service. It provides semi-private, short distance and door-to-door transport service linking major nodes in the network of public transport with urban spaces which are less well connected with public transport facilities. Not subject to strict time schedules that public transport normally complies with, motorcycle taxis demonstrate a surprising level of flexibility and have become indispensable in the everyday mobile practices of ordinary urban inhabitants of Guangzhou. The flourishing of motorcycle taxis in Guangzhou started in the

early 1990s and was closely associated with the popularity of motorcycles amongst the Guangzhou locals. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, alongside China's rapid post-reform economic development, Guangzhou's motorcycles gradually replaced manpowered bicycles. In 1990, approximately 200, 000 motorcycles ran in Guangzhou's urban streets and this number rose exponentially to 800, 000<sup>19</sup> in 1998. They were used by households for everyday mobility as well as by professional motorcycle taxi drivers as a means for earning a living. Motorcycles provided a much more flexible, rapid and efficient way of urban mobility and once they were seen as a proud symbol of Guangzhou's nascent urban modernity. Yet, as Guangzhou's urban economy continued to boom during the past two decades, car-based urban mobility has become the new *zeitgeist* in the political and social elites' imagination of modern life and the ownerships of motorcycles were filtered down to less wealthy social groups. In the meantime, there has also been an intensifying anxiety over the contradiction between the extreme flexibility of motorcycle mobility and the emerging vision of car-based street order. Motorcycles, eventually, were ascribed with the stereotypes of backwardness, disorderliness and insecurity. More remarkably, after over 15 years of being extolled as flexible, convenient and efficient, motorcycle mobility was suddenly regarded as an "inefficient" or even "wasteful" use of public roads at odds with the dominant vision of car-based urban modernity. As a result, the municipal government of Guangzhou made several attempts to gradually outlaw the use of motorcycles. In 1998 the local Urban Transport Administration stopped licensing new motorcycles and in 2003 it was further prescribed that any motorcycle license was valid for only 10 years since its issuance. In 2001, the local government of Guangzhou implemented a municipal by-law which prohibited all motorcycles from entering two major urban blocks and two traffic arteries in the city centre. From 2004, motorcycles were prohibited to use 24 major urban traffic arteries; and eventually in 2007 the use of motorcycles in the city centre was utterly outlawed. On the other hand, after 2004 many motorcycle riders, in particular motorcycle taxi drivers, began to use, as a substitute of conventional motorcycles, what was called electric motorcycles – a design of motor-vehicles upgraded from manpowered bicycles but propelled by an electronic motor. However, in 2006 the municipal government of Guangzhou also outlawed the use of electrically driven motorcycles in the entire metropolitan area of Guangzhou on the basis of similar reasons to the outlawing of motorcycles propelled by fossil fuel. In this chapter, the term of motorcycle taxi refers to taxi service provided by both types of vehicles.

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<sup>19</sup> This number, however, refers only to those licensed, thus officially legal motorcycles. According to Dr. T, a senior official in local Transport Administration Department, the size of unlicensed motorcycles at least doubled this number.

The regulation of motorcycle taxis is a direct consequence of the outlawing of motorcycle mobility. Interestingly, motorcycle taxis as a form of business was never approved or licensed by the local state of Guangzhou. Ever since its invention, the motorcycle taxi service has been an informal urban economy which appropriates motorcycle mobility to meet the demands for flexible transport service. According to the *Rules on Traffic and Transport of the People's Republic of China*, any commodified transport service not licensed by a county or municipal government can be seen as illegal and subject to fine. But due to the important role that motorcycle taxis played in facilitating daily urban mobilities and channelling the pressure on state-owned public transport, the local state of Guangzhou initially adopted a quite tolerant stance towards them. It is only with the outlawing of motorcycles altogether that the motorcycle taxi became a primary object of governing practices.

Due to the illegalization of motorcycle mobility, the use of motorcycles by ordinary households for personal movement has been almost completely eradicated. But motorcycle taxis have persisted even in face of draconic police regulation. Nowadays in Guangzhou, motorcycle taxis are operated almost exclusively by rural-to-urban migrants who are struggling for economic survival in a rapidly modernizing metropolitan city. As the local labour market provides relatively fewer employment opportunities for the migrants who are generally less educated or skilled, motorcycle taxi service seems to be a relatively accessible way to sustain a livelihood in the city. On the other hand, motorcycle taxis have actually offered better incomes to those migrants than employments in other urban economic sectors. For most of those migrants, motorcycle taxi service can provide a monthly income of approximately 3000-6000 RMB, much higher than what can be earned from low-paying factory jobs in which rural migrants are normally employed. Motorcycle taxis, in this sense, provide a way for many rural migrants to appropriate human labour outside the established hierarchies of urban labour market. In the meantime, however, this particular form of motorcycle-based informal economy not only inherited the stigmatizing representations of motorcycles in general, but also catalyzed new narratives constructed to more concretely capture its *illegal* status and the disorderliness of migrant others who operated it against the backdrop of a totalizing rhetoric of modernity and the punitive practices of the municipal police power.

## Methods

This research is based on detailed examinations of the narratives and discourses related to the outlawing of motorcycle mobility, the practices employed in the street-level regulation of motorcycle taxis and the identities constructed through the interplays of discourses and social power. Three research questions are engaged with in this research: what are the rationales and discourses constructed to justify the regulation of motorcycle mobility? How are dominant understandings of motorcycle taxis translated into the street-level exercise of disciplinary power? How does this regulatory regime shape, and how is it shaped by, various identities and positionalities?

To answer these questions, this chapter will first review all the articles and editorials related to motorcycle mobility and motorcycle taxis in three major local newspapers, *namely Yangcheng Evening News, Nanfang Daily and Guangzhou Daily*, from 2002 to 2006, right before the use of motorcycles was utterly outlawed in the urban centre in 2007. Given that major newspapers in China are under direct state sponsorship, they are expected to act as the key sites where dominant discourses produced by social and political elites can be played out. I will also attempt to situate these dominant media representations into my discussion of the regulation of motorcycle taxis after 2007 to excavate how the illegalized status of motorcycle mobility contributes to the constructed deviancy of motorcycle taxis. I have also collected publicized government documents and applied via official channels for relevant information on government rationalities in the regulation of motorcycles and motorcycle taxis, which resulted in three Responses to the Requests of Government Information from the Police Department of Guangzhou (hereafter Responses 1, 2, and 3). As will be examined later, these accounts in the local newspapers and government documents often appear to be selective, narrowly-focused, exaggerated, ungrounded and removed from many social members' grounded everyday experiences. But as I have argued earlier, it is precisely through these diverse configurations of representations that we can glimpse the working of social power in the production of knowledge.

Meanwhile, 27 in-depth interviews in total have also been conducted with motorcycle taxi drivers (n=16) and local police officers and government officials (n=11), especially those in Guangzhou Police Department of Traffic, a police organ which specializes in urban traffic management. Interview data are expected to contribute to a concrete understanding of the various representational and discursive spaces underlying the construction of both motorcycle mobility and motorcycle taxis, the practices of micro-level regulatory techniques and the motorcycle taxi drivers' formation of subjectivity under the layers of hegemonic spatialities imposed upon the experience of mundane mobilities.



**Figure 6-1 Motorcycle taxis awaiting passengers at the entrance of a metro station**

(Source: photography by the author)

## **Representing motorcycle mobility: stigmatization and knowledge production**

This section engages with my first research question, i.e. the ways in which motorcycle mobility as a whole was represented and rendered “problematic” in dominant state and social discourses. It examines how images of urban disorder and insecurity emerged out of mobile subjects and objects, which formed the basis on which the regulation of motorcycle taxis can be further discussed. These representations of motorcycle mobility explained explicitly why the maximization of more ‘respectable’ and “ordered” forms of mobilities depended on the mooring of motorcycles. They created an “ambient power” (Allen, 2006) which defined the normative codes of mobile practices on the urban streets. In the post-reform era, although the Chinese state still significantly departs from a liberal-democratic model of government, it has nonetheless transformed fundamentally from an ideology-promoting state to a regime focusing on the management of economic development and public goods to re-centre its political legitimacy. Similar to its Western counterparts, it needs to mobilize a dominant rhetoric constructed on the basis of normative values, ideas and ideologies to justify its

programs of governing. It also relies on a set of *technologies* of governmentality (Miller and Rose, 2008), including media reportage, statistics and social surveys, to frame constructed problems into scientific rationalities and concrete “realities”.

In Response 1, the Police Department of Guangzhou gives out explicitly three reasons which justify the regulation of motorcycle mobility, namely the high frequency of traffic accidents involving motorcycles; the disturbance of motorcycles to street order and traffic efficiency; and the connection between the use of motorcycles and street robberies. These three reasons also appeared in a number of newspaper articles which were intended to circulate to the general public the rationales for governmental actions. Therefore I will frame my discussions of dominant social and state discourses in accordance with these three themes. The representational and discursive resources with which governmental rationalities are constituted are diverse. Most of the discourses and representations are produced directly by the local state and reflected in government documents or reproduced in newspapers through some editorial hands. The other discursive materials reflect the views and ideas of socially more powerful and culturally more mainstream groups who are outside the formal state apparatuses but nonetheless inform the rationalities in government policy-making. Yet these two domains of discourses are not mutually separate. Both of them feed into the legitimacy of the regulation of motorcycles. Social groups’ discourses are often entangled with or even subsumed under the viewpoints, ideas and knowledge constructed by the state. And the state, on the other hand, can also actively draw from more powerful social groups’ ideas and narratives.

### **Problematizing street insecurity**

The first problem associated with motorcycles which was rendered visible concerns the issue of insecurity. Through discursively configuring the problem of street insecurity, a naturalized connection was built up between motorcycle mobility and accidents, injuries and even deaths. These representations portrayed motorcycle mobility as a major threat to bodily security and constructed the taken-for-granted “truth” that motorcycles were necessarily associated with higher probabilities of traffic accidents. Motorcycles, as a result, were continuously referred to as “street killers” which could not guarantee a proper administration of the wellbeing of life in an increasing complex system of traffic. As one newspaper article described motorcycle mobility:

According to the Guangzhou’s Police Department of Traffic, since 2000 till now those who were killed by motorcycle accidents account for approximately 40-50% of all deaths in traffic accidents. From 2000 to 2003, totally 3298 people were killed in motorcycle

accidents, about 2-3 deaths every day. Therefore the motorcycle is now dubbed as the “biggest killer on streets”. There is also a humour amongst Guangzhou locals that “the first generation motorcycle riders are all dead now”.

*Guangzhou Daily*, 13 January, 2004

Also, one article appearing in *Yangcheng Evening News* adopted the same rhetoric of the “biggest killer on streets” in an attempt to attest the rationalities underlying the outlawing of motorcycles:

The motorcycle has already become Guangzhou’s “No.1 killer on streets”. During the first half of 2003, there were totally 3044 motorcycle accidents in Guangzhou, with 363 deaths. Those who were killed in motorcycle accidents accounted for 43.61% of all deaths in traffic accidents.

*Yangcheng Evening News*, 15 January, 2004

As we can see from these two quotes, statistics played a central role in rendering intelligible the threat to bodily security that motorcycles were potential to incur. It served as the key technique of discursive government that grounded the programmes of regulation into claimed scientific rationalities. Numbers, in this sense, acted as the primary signifiers of the perceived danger of motorcycle mobility. From 2002 to 2006, such statistics abounded in all three newspapers. Some most illustrative examples include:

In last year, 6760 motorcycle accidents happened in Guangzhou, constituting 50.4% of all traffic accidents. 905 died and 8987 were injured, accounting respectively for 47.3% of all traffic deaths and 61.8% of all casualties. From January to October this year, there have been 5141 motorcycle accidents, causing 600 deaths and 6934 injuries. The percentages are respectively 53.55%, 42.64% and 61.82%.

*Nanfang Daily*, 20 November, 2003

In the first half of this year, there have been 2275 motorcycle accidents, causing 332 deaths and 2464 injuries. The percentages are respectively 52.19%, 43.74% and 46.41%.

*Nanfang Daily*, 20 July, 2006

Interestingly, such statistics also led to an eye-catching conclusion that if the so-called Accident Probability Index for cars was defaulted as 1, it would be as high as 9 for motorcycles – one argument crafted by a prestigious Chinese transport scientist and was cited widely even in several government documents (*Yangcheng Evening News*, 18 December, 2006). In the same time, however, we may also be surprised at how vaguely the notion of “motorcycle accident” was defined in those number-based narratives. In fact, all three newspapers tended to define the concept of motorcycle accidents so broadly as referring to all traffic accidents involving the presence of a motorcycle. What was neglected,



on the other hand, was a nuanced examination of the distribution of responsibility in any given case of accident. Ironically, both the newspapers and police officers that I interviewed acknowledged that motorcycles were not responsible for all those accidents, and in many cases accidents were simply the outcomes of unexpected street encounters. However, rather than looking more closely at the exact roles that motorcycles played and the responsibilities they bore in specific traffic accidents, newspaper representations turned out to highlight the *vulnerability* of motorcycles, or motorcycle riders more precisely, in *all* accidents involving motorcycles. In such representations, motorcycle riders were portrayed as more vulnerable to injury or death in face of clashes with physically more forceful vehicles such as cars and trucks. Meanwhile, such representations also scrutinized closely the “under-controllability” of motorcycles due to their smaller weights, mechanical uncertainty and lack of technological sophistication. Anecdote-style stories flourished, depicting how motorcycles might suddenly lose balance or control of direction during travelling and how unexpected clashes with steel-and-concrete road infrastructures, which also emerged out of these sudden moments of uncontrollability, could lead to death or serious injury. Both local media and police officers tended to describe such perilous street collisions as “clashes between flesh and steel”:

Clashes between cars are less likely to result in death, but clashes involving motorcycles can easily cause death. You know, in a car your fleshly body is protected by a strong steel infrastructure; but with a motorcycle, your flesh is exposed and subject to direct collisions with physically more powerfully structures such as cars. It can be proved very dangerous for any motorcycle riders.

Mr. D, Police Supervisor, Interview 02122011A

Such accounts of vulnerability went hand in hand with representations of the unruliness of motorcycle mobility and motorcycle drivers. Such representations highlighted how motorcycle riders lacked compliance with traffic codes and how unruly mobilities of motorcycles raised the possibility of traffic accidents. The motorcycle drivers were frequently portrayed as those who sabotaged the normative ordering of urban traffic by driving faster than they should, driving the opposite direction in a given traffic lane, competing with cars for lanes or carrying too many passengers. These transgressive acts brought about unexpected and uncontrolled street encounters that disrupted the rational order of uninterrupted flow and were believed to lead naturally to accidents. As a result, a large sum of newspaper reports and articles attributed accidents to motorcycle drivers’ violation of normative traffic rules. While these accounts might speak to certain realities, they nonetheless neglected the complex, sometimes irrational ways in which traffic rules could be

appropriated and accommodated in micro-level practices and how not-so-friendly traffic environments might constrain mobile objects/subjects' ability to abide by established codes and rules. More importantly, these accounts also served to stigmatize motorcycle drivers as an essentially chaotic and unruly mobile social group to be excluded from secured urban spaces. Indeed, many interviewed police officers' descriptions of motorcycle mobility manifested how those narratives of disorder and unruliness has been incorporated into the construction of police mentality. In these officers' accounts, the Chinese word of *suzhi* (literally meaning "quality") is frequently elicited; and according to them, it was those motorcycle drivers' lack of personal qualities which had contributed to their intrinsic inability to move with order and safety. Dominant representations of motorcycle traffic accidents, in this sense, contributed to the constitution of a social group which was ascribed with the stigmas of under-qualification, unruliness and insecurity:

Normally those who drive a motorcycle lacked a high level of *suzhi*. After all they usually belonged to those less-than-wealthy social groups and many of them were under-educated. Compared to those who drove a car, they seemed to be much more unruly. Most of them did not have a clear sense of traffic rules. For example, some of them did not even know it was illegal to drive the opposite direction in a particular traffic lane.

Mr. L, Police Superintendent, Interview 08122011A

### **Visioning modern and efficient urban streets**

Representations of motorcycles also relate to the perceived contradiction between motorcycle mobility and the local state's aspiration for making Guangzhou a desirable place to global flows of capital and resources. The positioning of motorcycle mobility at the opposite end to modernity and progress is situated within Guangzhou's emerging cosmopolitan modernity and the local state's ambition to construct a global city identity. Hence motorcycle mobility is discursively constructed as incompatible with the modern values of order, controllability and efficiency. One argument which was widely circulated amongst local media was that according to certain scientific research (source unknown), the amount of motorcycles in a particular city correlated negatively to the city's level of modernization (see e.g. *Yangcheng Evening News*, 15 January, 2004). This argument was unsettling not only because merely ten years before motorcycles were considered exactly the symbol of urban modernity by the people of Guangzhou, but also because it attempted to build up a scientific logic that could quantitatively measure the relationship between motorcycle mobility and the nebulous notion of "modernity". Although this argument was subsequently criticized as both simplistic and scientifically unsound, it nonetheless served as

the basis on which motorcycle mobility was re-imagined and reconstructed in relation to the hegemonic notions of progress and modernity.

In these narratives, the unruly and transgressive mobility of motorcycles not only created threat to bodily security, but also fundamentally jeopardized the expected order and efficiency of public roads. It resulted in disorderly and chaotic use of urban spaces, and profoundly impaired the ability of other social members to enjoy uninterrupted flows. As a result, a large amount of media representations blamed motorcycles for both Guangzhou's notoriety for chaotic traffic conditions and its frequent traffic congestions. Mobility in public roads was unproblematically understood as a functional resource to be distributed rationally, rather than the crucial arena whereby citizenship and right could be enacted. As a result, both the local media and state discourses were eager to describe motorcycle mobility as an irrational and inefficient use of public roads, precisely because its flexibility of movements contradicted the entrenched notions of stability and order:

Motorcycles were constantly violating the traffic rules, which seriously disrupted the normal order of urban traffic. Travelling in motorcycles was continuously chaotic and transgressions of traffic rules, such as driving unlicensed motorcycles, driving the opposite direction and driving in the small interstice between cars were very common. It not only jeopardized the order of traffic, but also reduced the efficiency of the use of public roads.

*Response 1, Guangzhou Police Department, 25 April, 2012*

For this reason, the motorcycle was frequently portrayed as an "out-of-date" means of urban transport which should naturally die out in the linear process of social development and progress. It was also widely claimed that the role which motorcycles played in facilitating everyday mobilities could be more efficiently fulfilled by more "respectable" ways of urban mobility such as public buses, the newly constructed metro system and more importantly private cars. Dr. T, a high-rank planning official in the local Transport Administration Department, suggested that this vision of a public-transport-cum-private-car urban future was deeply embedded in the planning philosophy of the local political elites and technocrats when the outlawing of motorcycles was proposed. Soon after motorcycles were partly outlawed in 2004, many newspaper representations featured how major traffic arteries in the urban centre had been "cleaned up" and restored the rational and uninterrupted flows of cars. And the municipal government of Guangzhou also claimed in various occasions that after the outlawing of motorcycles, the average speed for cars in main urban arteries had been increased at least by 5-10 kilometres per hour (e.g. *Guangzhou Daily*, 28 October, 2006; *Nanfang Daily*, 28 October, 2006).

Still, there was another and even more disturbing discourse which called for the motorcycles to “give back the roads to the cars”. In this discursive formulation, motorcycle drivers were re-imagined as the urban others who had usurped urban spaces from the more decent and respectable private car owners. This discursively constructed dichotomization of motorcycle/private cars, in this sense, was mapped squarely into the imagined binaries of disorder/order, backwardness/progressiveness. In a 2003 news article, the then Mayor of Guangzhou explicitly confirmed that the outlawing of motorcycles would serve specifically for “making more space” for private cars:

Guangzhou needs to ensure the uninterrupted flow of traffic on its roads and also optimize its network of traffic. Securing smooth flows of traffic in all our major transport arteries is the key to avoiding traffic congestion. Therefore we must restrict the use of motorcycles to make more room for private cars by cleaning up motorcycles from the spaces of urban traffic.

*Yangcheng Evening News*, 6 October, 2003



**Figure 6-2 Newspaper representation of Dongfeng Road before (right) and after (left) the outlawing of motorcycles**

(Source: *Guangzhou Daily*, 2 January, 2006)

### **From insecurity to criminality**

The local society’s hostile attitudes towards motorcycles were also associated with the perceived connection between motorcycle mobility and street criminality. Since the late 1990s, motorcycles had been intensely used by street criminals in Guangzhou as a means to conduct robberies. In usual cases, the criminals would ride a motorcycle with high speed,

approach a pedestrian from behind and then unexpectedly rob the victim of handbags, earrings, necklaces or mobile phones. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, the motorcycle-based street robbery contributed significantly to the perceived insecurity and chaos in the streets of Guangzhou, and it was also viewed as a collective mental trauma for the city's ordinary dwellers. According to the local Police Department, in 2002 totally 9668 motorcycle-based street robberies happened in Guangzhou, accounting for 52% of all robbery offences. The number and percentage in 2003 were respectively 10210 and 47.2% (Response 1). For ordinary urban residents in Guangzhou, being the victim of a street robbery was a highly disturbing psychological experience, since it was normally in the form of an unexpected, fleeting street collision which so violently disrupted the established disposition of the body in relation to both the surrounding physical environment and the taken-for-granted street order. A lot of media representations, therefore, highlighted the unsettling and disturbing nature of such encounters with motorcycle-based street robbers:

[Miss He:] At that moment, I could hear noises of a motorcycle getting closer from behind me. But the time was just too short for me to make any reaction. The motorcycle rider began to grab my handbag. I tried to grab it back, but the speed of the motorcycle was so high and my handbag was taken by those thugs anyway.

*Guangzhou Daily*, 7 March, 2006

As a result the streets in Guangzhou were continuously referred to as pedestrian unfriendly and associated with the dystopian visions of danger, crime and disorder. As a result, both motorcycles and motorcycle drivers were targeted by the state as the principal objects of street policing. The municipal government of Guangzhou issued a public notice advising pedestrians to beware of five types of motorcycles on streets, including motorcycles which stopped by a bank or a shopping mall but without switching off the motor; motorcycles which travelled slowly alongside the streets; motorcycles with two male riders; motorcycles with licenses not registered in Guangzhou or with a fake license; and motorcycles whose license numbers could not be properly read. On the other hand, in 2006 the High Court of Guangdong Province revised the provincial criminal codes and defined any motorcycle-based robbery of a worth over 500 Chinese RMB a felony; and criminals involved in such robberies might be subject to death sentence if in extreme circumstances (for example in cases involving the death or serious injury of the victim).

Meanwhile, the local police force of Guangzhou launched a series of campaigns against motorcycle-based street robberies. In the media representations of those campaigns, criminals on motorcycles were continuously portrayed as desperate street villains who brutally violated ordinary pedestrians' bodily security and property right. Their disobedience

and inconformity to the legal regime were also spotlighted in these representations. News reports abounded which depicted in detail how those street criminals so desperately resisted police arrests and how those resistances resulted in the injury or even killing of police officers and ordinary people voluntarily assisting police arrests. The local police force, on the other hand, showed an extremely high morale in battling with those criminals on motorcycles. The street encounters between the police and the criminals were transformed into the key site in which the police force re-asserted the normative police spirit of exerting heroic power to suppress dangerous and threatening elements in the society. Local newspapers also featured several stories of ordinary urban residents who were voluntarily united and fought valiantly against motorcycle-based crimes. In these representations, the street criminals were re-imagined as not only the hostile force against the state power, but also the common enemies to the respectable part of the general public as a whole. Motorcycle criminality, unexpectedly, served as the cohesive force which restored the civic values of communal solidarity and collective grassroots actions in a rapidly neoliberalizing, individualizing Chinese urban society.

It is certainly not the aim of this chapter to justify the street crime of robbery, or to criticize the local society's attempt to suppress it. But at the same time we also need to note that to represent motorcycle robberies as immediate, de-contextualized street encounters is also to disarticulate it from the structural factors of social inequality which contributed to crimes. For example, many newspaper representations emphasized the disproportionately large presence of rural-to-urban migrants in conducting street crimes, but ignored how discriminatory institutional arrangements in urban China constrained the possibility for migrants to pursue a more decent livelihood (see Solinger, 1999). Without making close scrutiny of the historical contingencies of crime, such representational regimes ran the risk of universalizing motorcycle drivers as an essentially dangerous and threatening social group; and as this chapter will show later, such tropes of danger and criminality have indeed played a subtle yet significant role in constituting the rationalities underlying the regulation of motorcycle taxis after 2007.

## **Revanchism on the street: regulating motorcycle taxis**

### **The production of consent**

After the outlawing of motorcycles in 2007, the motorcycle taxi turned out to be the only form of motorcycle mobility that persisted in the urban streets of Guangzhou. Without doubt, motorcycle taxis have largely inherited the stigmatizing representations of motorcycle

mobility which were discussed earlier. Even before 2007, the motorcycle taxis was a frequent character in all sorts of newspaper representations. Their perceived disorderliness and unruliness were especially spotlighted in those media depictions of insecurity and unruliness, if relatively less of street robberies. However, given that the discursive construction of motorcycle taxis is inextricably intertwined with the representations of motorcycle mobility as a whole, it seems bewildering to see how poorly motorcycle taxis were represented in the process of decision-making. Before the outlawing of motorcycles in 2007, the issue of motorcycle taxi as the means for a marginal social group to earn a living was only flimsily engaged in public debates and government documents. The reason for the significant absence of voices from this social group, arguably, was that the majority of motorcycle taxi operators were rural-to-urban migrants and therefore not taken into account in the policy-making process undertaken by the local state.

Besides, the underrepresentation of motorcycle taxi drivers is also part and parcel of the local state's attempt to *produce* popular consent to the outlawing of motorcycles through complex tactics of evidence-making and policy arrangements. For example, in a survey-based research which was published by Guangzhou Public-Opinion Research Centre (GPORC), a government-sponsored survey institute, all research findings were carefully organized under an overarching conclusion that most Guangzhou citizens were supportive of the outlawing of motorcycles. Not only were its survey questions framed within "politically correct" narratives of security and order which grassroots urban citizens could hardly resist, but curiously only 34% of the survey respondents were actually motorcycle users. Although it was reported that over 60% motorcycle users surveyed were against the outlawing of motorcycles, this research finding was nonetheless submerged under the overwhelming project of consensus-building. With specific reference to motorcycle taxis, the same research estimated that only 10% of all motorcycles in Guangzhou were used for earning a living, ignoring largely the migrants who were not counted as potential respondents in the survey as well as their motorcycles which were commonly unlicensed. To tackle the issue of breadwinning motorcycles, the municipal government launched a series of programs aiming at the re-employment of motorcycle taxi drivers. Although these programmes were not explicitly exclusive of rural migrants, they proved attractive only to those motorcycle taxi drivers local to Guangzhou who were offered a reemployment-cum-social-insurance compensation package. The migrants, on the other hand, were not entitled to the social insurance scheme while in the same time the re-employment opportunities proffered income much lower than that from motorcycle taxi service.

Nonetheless, by excluding the migrant motorcycle taxi drivers from the process of decision-making, the municipal government of Guangzhou had been successful in building up a societal consensus that the outlawing of motorcycles would benefit the collective good of the city and that the individual losses resulting from it would be properly compensated. It also served to delineate the moral boundary between consent and dissent and to discursively construct as essentially deviant and in compliant those migrants who had no choice but to transgress the policy regime by continuing to provide motorcycle taxi service. This constructed dissident identity is coupled with new state discourses which contributed to the production of the otherness of motorcycle taxis in the “post-motorcycle Guangzhou”. First, due to the outlawing of motorcycles almost all motorcycle taxis in Guangzhou now are unlicensed and unregistered with the local government. This situation has suddenly rendered motorcycle taxis, as well their drivers, largely “unknown” to the state apparatus. It has therefore raised a huge anxiety within the local police force over the state’s inability to “know” the subjects/objects under its rule (Foucault, 1991a; Gordon, 1991). This unknowability, in turn, enhanced the stigmas of disorder, danger and crime attached to motorcycle mobility. Second, both local media representations and police discourses now tend to focus on the relatively *higher* income that migrants can earn from motorcycle taxis than low-paid employments conventionally occupied by the migrant social group. In these representations, motorcycle taxi operators are portrayed as selfish social members who sacrifice the collective interests of the city for the sake of personal gains. These narratives reconfirm the hegemonic notion that every social member should be positioned in a proper place of an ordered society and “earning more than you should” is necessarily related to the disruption of social norms. Third, although motorcycle taxi drivers were not often associated with street robberies before 2007, they are now increasingly considered to be potentially dangerous and threatening to street security. In part because of the stern regulatory hand of the local state, migrant motorcycle taxi drivers are now strengthening social ties amongst themselves in order to tackle street-level police power. Interestingly, this strengthening of mutual connections is now interpreted by local police officers as the manifestation of motorcycle taxi drivers’ transformation from “individual business runners” to “collective street gangs”. Finally, the concentration of motorcycle taxis around major traffic nodes, the motorcycle taxi drivers’ soliciting for potential passengers, and the rural migrants’ own identity as under-qualified, undesirable urban others (Zhang, 2001) have contributed to another image of street disorder associated with motorcycle taxis. Those newly constructed narratives and the abovementioned representations of motorcycle mobility in general have



jointly shaped the local elites' and the state's stance towards motorcycle taxis, serving to justify the purification of urban streets by cleaning up motorcycle taxis.

### **Street bureaucracy at work: between governing techniques and police subjectivity**

Ever since 2004, the local Police Department of Guangzhou, especially the Traffic Police, has been dedicating a huge amount of energy to cleaning up motorcycles from urban streets. It is important to note that the local police's regulation of motorcycle taxis is not out of a paranoid pursuit of domination and oppression, but grounded in the long-established tradition of police power to defend the "good", the "ordered" and the "respectable" (Blomley, 2011). As Herbert (1996; 1997) has argued, the police are agents of state power which actively construct their own rules, spirits, beliefs and cultural meanings as they try to ensure socio-spatial order. This chapter, therefore, attempts to ground police motives and police morale into context-specific games of power and governmental rationalities. The regulation of motorcycle taxis at a street level means much more than the exercise of coercive disciplinary power. For the local police officers it is also an active process of subject formation during which their creative use of the territorial techniques of spatial management is articulated with the hegemonic vision of orderly urban spaces. During my interviews, not a single police officer related the regulation of motorcycle taxis to potential oppression of a marginal social group's right to urban space. The rhetoric, instead, was discursively scaled down to an immediate street context, to a moral judgment of right and wrong, order and disorder. It is in such a discursive field that the street-level police morale is powerfully articulated. According to the local Police Department, in 2011 alone over 255, 000 motorcycles used for taxi service were confiscated via street-level regulation (Response 3). But in the same time local police officers also acknowledge frankly that it is beyond their capacity to utterly rid urban streets of motorcycle taxis – the sheer number of them and the convenience of buying new vehicles impose a huge cost of human resource upon the local Police Department. Hence in the police officers' narratives, the symbolic dimension of police power is prioritized to the actual effects of street-level regulation – in other words, the symbolic presence of the state power in maintaining street order is considered as essential in sustaining a police identity:

We do not really expect that all the motorcycle taxis can be cleaned up. What we do is in fact all about deterrence. The pedagogical effect of regulation is more important than the number of motorcycles confiscated. If you do not regulate them, the people would think the government is doing nothing and the whole social order will be broken.

Mr. L, Police Superintendent, Interview 08122011A

As a result, the local police force is keen on devising an exhaustive array of disciplinary tactics to be adopted at a street level. One motorcycle taxi driver describes their encounters with the police as an endless game between the cat and the rat:

The logic of the game is quite simple: they try to locate us and confiscate our vehicles, and we try to avoid them. It is basically like between cats and rats. But the problem for us is, you can never be sure when and where the police officers may turn up. They always have new ways to maximize their ability to confiscate as many motorcycles as they can. You see, in China the government's talent and creativity are all used to tackle helpless, poor people. (Interview 05112011A)

At an earlier stage, the traffic police's tactic of street-level regulation was quite simple. One police officer riding a police motorcycle would watch at a specific spot by the roadside, and chase on sight any motorcycle taxi. But soon this watch-and-chase approach was criticized as too passive and potentially dangerous if it resulted in street racing between police officers and motorcycle taxis. Then the local police decided to set up observation-points at the intersections of main traffic arteries, so that motorcycle taxis could be much easily caught when they slowed down for traffic lights. Subsequently this tactic was considered as equally passive as the motorcycle taxi drivers would simply turn around to drive in the opposite direction when they sighted police officers at certain intersections or crossroads. If immediately turning to the opposite direction is relatively difficult for larger vehicles, it seems to be much easier to handle for motorcycles. Eventually the police realized that it was precisely the flexibility of motorcycles and their non-routine ways of navigating mobilities that raised difficulties for regulation. Hence the local police now prefer targeting upon the moments of the relative *immobility* for motorcycle taxis: the moments when motorcycles taxis were parked or awaiting potential passengers at certain "concentration points" – metro station entrances, entrances to residential communities or pavements alongside busy urban roads. To act upon the moments of immobility requires the joint actions of several local government departments, since the traffic police have no jurisdiction in regulating immobile vehicles parked at an urban public space. In normal cases, the local police would seek permission from other government departments and then a squad of police officers would unexpectedly raid those sites. Such actions not only significantly reduce the chance for motorcycle taxi drivers to escape police regulation, but also result in a considerable increase in the number of motorcycles which are confiscated during police campaigns.

Although this shift of the focus from mobility to immobility has profoundly vitiated the motorcycle taxis' ability to dodge police regulation, the local police are still less satisfied

with the deterring effect that this tactic has achieved. The increased alert of motorcycle taxi drivers has compromised the police's ability to successfully and effectively locate and act upon a specific "concentration point". As a result, police regulation of motorcycle taxis is now increasingly conducted by police staff in plain clothes rather than police uniforms. This tactic is aimed to reduce the possibility that police actions can be detected in advance by motorcycle taxi drivers. In this sense, the demand for "better regulation" has entailed the blurring of the normative boundary of state authority, which is normally associated with ritualized visual symbols such as uniforms of state officers. Also, the police have adopted a more flexible schedule of working time to create a 24-hour-regulation system for tackling motorcycle taxis. The combination of plainclothes police force and flexible timing has proved an immensely powerful strategy in eliminating motorcycle taxi drivers' ability to "connect" with the presence of state power with bodily senses or to accommodate state regulation by managing alternative time-spaces. Police raid, as a result, has become a thoroughly unpredictable street encounter with the coercive state power. One motorcycle taxi driver describes a deep sense of powerlessness while encountering police officers in plain clothes:

If the police officers come in uniforms, we can still have some time to react before they come close to you. But now they are dressed just like everyone else. They approach you slowly and no one can tell that they are actually police officers. Sometimes, they even lie to you that they want to buy motorcycle taxi service. Then they suddenly hold your motorcycle firmly and then identify themselves to you. What can you do then? When things turn out to be that situation, you cannot resist at all because in China you do not dare to attack a police officer. (Interview 16112011A)

Such unexpected encounters between the police and the motorcycle taxi drivers can easily end up in violent conflicts. For motorcycle drivers, a confiscated motorcycle normally means a loss equivalent to half a month's income. To those less wealthy urban migrants, such a loss is more psychologically disturbing than economically damaging. For police officers, on the other hand, such face-to-face encounters with those deviant others are also emotionally charged experiences. Many police officers cannot help trespassing on the boundary between state rationalities and their personal loathing of the migrant motorcycle drivers. The elevated police morale often leads to excessive use of violence in tackling disobedient motorcycle taxi drivers. Indeed, narratives depicting the state's "hatred" towards street nuisances are constantly elicited during the interviews with motorcycle taxi drivers:

I bet you [meaning the researcher] never really saw such a scene. It is not only violent. It is heartbreaking. I saw one police officer trying to confiscate one's motorcycle yesterday,

just a few hundred meters from here. The police officer pushed the motorcycle so hard to the ground and also beat the driver harshly, simply because the driver did not want to give away his vehicle. The driver was treated as if he had committed a felony like murder. It was so cruel and I really do not understand. Why do they hate us so much? We do nothing but try to make a living. (Interview 11112011A)



**Figure 6-3 A police truck loaded with confiscated motorcycle taxis**

(Source: photography by the author)

### **Motorcycle mobility as experience of subaltern identity**

On the other hand, the regulation of motorcycle taxis is also a crucial discursive terrain for migrant motorcycle drivers to negotiate their identity in relation to dominant representations and the exercise of state power. This section will examine briefly how motorcycle taxi drivers interpret and negotiate the rationalities of regulation in diverse, sometimes mutually contradictory ways. It argues that subalternity is a self-experienced identity position intrinsically connected to material social relations and the asymmetrical geometry of power. The socially produced category of motorcycle taxis is actively engaged with through both bodily experiences of everyday mobility and their understandings of the dominant power relations in a post-reform, neoliberalizing Chinese urban society. As various commentators have argued, travelling time is not passive or empty, but full of sensuous engagement with a

diverse array of people, objects, meanings and practices (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Jensen, 2009; Cresswell, 2010). In the case of motorcycle taxi drivers, understandings and interpretations of their social identity are engraved in rich, if psychologically negative, experiences of everyday mobility, space and social relations. The local police's draconic regulation of urban streets has transformed motorcycle travelling into a temporality full of constant alert, of chasing and being chased, and of potential conflicts with state power. Hence, the motorcycle mobility can be viewed as the key site in which dominant relations of social power are extensively experienced and actively understood by those migrant others.

Motorcycle taxi drivers' subject position is shaped by the dominant representations of motorcycle taxis as well as their diverse tactics in counteracting state power at the street level. While the former has been discussed in detail so far, it is equally important to note that the street game of cat-and-rat also contributes to the production of subaltern social and cultural experiences. To keep providing transport service, motorcycle taxi drivers have adopted various tactics to play more effectively the role as "rats". "Escaping the police" for sustaining a living, in their narratives, has become an essential element in their life no less important than making a living *per se*. These ordinary tactics include constantly watching around when riding a motorcycle, identifying locations where police officers are more likely to appear, doing taxi business at night when there are fewer police officers and using small lanes rather than main traffic arteries. Many motorcycle taxi drivers have developed sophisticated knowledge of the network of small lanes and pathways which can help them more easily get rid of police chasing. Some motorcycle drivers restrict their business within urban neighbourhoods subject to less police intervention, such as Guangzhou's various urban villages – the spatial legacies of former rural settlements which nowadays are mainly used for accommodating migrant workers' demands for informal housing. Some others have even developed skills in effectively distinguishing police officers in plainclothes from potential clients. Sophisticated networks of information exchange have also been established so that information about police actions may be circulated more efficiently amongst the motorcycle taxi drivers.

But from the perspective of motorcycle taxi drivers themselves, these resistant tactics are far from transgressive appropriation of urban spaces which leads to romantic empowerment. Instead, these moments of tackling state power are mentally disturbing processes which have enhanced the self-experience of their social position as a marginalized social group. The ways in which those motorcycle taxi drivers position their identity in relation to the dominant notion of street order and the more "respectable" part of the urban society engendered complex narratives concerning the relationship between state power and the

othered motorcycle taxi drivers. In the first place, many motorcycle taxi drivers have internalized the stigmatizing representations of motorcycle mobility in the reconstruction of subjectivity. Many of them also consider motorcycles a disorderly, unruly and potentially dangerous way of urban mobility. Inadvertent acts of breaking the traffic codes, in particular passing through a red light and driving the opposite direction, are discursively spotlighted as manifestations of their failure to comply with institutionalized social norms.

Yet, the motorcycle taxi drivers refuse to portray themselves as essentially dangerous or threatening to established social order. Instead their rhetoric seeks recourse from the idea that they are “less educated” and not yet adapted to urban ways of living. Also, breaking traffic rules is often seen by them as the outcome of inter-personal social interactions rather than the manifestation of an essential human nature of unruliness. As those motorcycle drivers suggests, many minor transgressions of traffic codes are actually at the request of the passengers for the purpose of saving time:

You know, what we are doing is a business and you need to obey the passengers’ requests so that you will be able to make money. Many people choose motorcycle taxis precisely because they are more flexible and can save them some time by breaking some traffic rules, in cases that they are in a hurry. We can do this and in most cases we do resist those requests. We need to keep rapport with our passengers because we need to make a living. (Interview 09112011A)

Indeed, the rhetoric of “making money” and “making a living” is the discursive contour that the motorcycle taxi drivers frequently employ to justify their use of urban streets for commodified transport service. However, in dominant discourses there is an unsolved tension between the migrants’ aspiration for pursuing a relatively better income and the hegemonic vision of ordered urban space. Notably, to reconcile their intention of sustaining a living with the widely accepted notions of order and civility has actually enabled many of the migrants to contest the stigmatizing representations of motorcycle taxis through a diversity of discursive formulations. Although most of these narratives seem to be incorporated into the hegemonic conceptions of order, efficiency and security, they also provide some alternative frameworks to ground those abstract notions into concrete everyday practices. These narratives hint at the fact that the dominant categories of motorcycle mobility and motorcycle taxis are abstracted out of heterogeneous experiences of everyday mobile practices; and they also downplay the agency of motorcycle drivers to manoeuvre street security and efficiency in ways different from mainstream rationalities.

In the first place, motorcycle taxi drivers contest the definition of the motorcycle as a unitary system of connotations and meanings. For example, many motorcycle taxi drivers

make a clear distinction between motorcycles propelled by gasoline and those propelled by electricity whose maximum speed is much lower. To them, motorcycles propelled by electricity can be seen as a compromise between high-speed, potentially dangerous motorcycle mobility and an increasingly complex urban traffic system. Second, motorcycle taxi drivers also contend that random violation of traffic codes does not necessarily mean the lack of the attention to security. With regard to institutionalized traffic rules, motorcycle taxi drivers continually switch between compliance and violation. Whether or not to respect traffic rules is a decision based on the immediate micro-level contexts of mobile practices, rather than any essential human nature. Bodily security is always at the heart of the decision-making process. Such an argument can be seen as a discursive attempt to *disconnect* particular mobile technologies from taken-for-granted, malign human intentions. This attempt can also be glimpsed from the motorcycle taxi drivers' argument that motorcycle mobility is not naturally related to street crimes. Criminality, in these narratives, is insightfully viewed as the product of structural factors such as social inequality and welfare dysfunction, rather than the technological means which may or may not facilitate criminal behaviours. Finally, motorcycle taxi drivers also propose a different perspective to envisage the efficient use of urban roads. For them, the small size of motorcycle taxis enables them to realize mobility by occupying fairly limited space of urban roads. Also, the flexibility that motorcycle taxis bear also allows them to employ more diverse, often non-linear routines to navigate particular journeys. As a result, many motorcycle taxi drivers suggest that they only use the "residual" space between larger vehicles, which has actually rendered the use of urban roads more, rather than less, efficient.

This vision of "not-so-bad" motorcycle taxis, apparently, contradicts the representations in mainstream social and political discourses. Indeed, it is through the motorcycle taxi drivers' interpretation of this contradiction that a self-experienced subaltern identity is most fully articulated. In the first place, the outlawing of motorcycle mobility is unequivocally understood by them as the urban elites' endeavour to impose a hegemonic spatiality upon urban streets by excluding marginal urban social groups' right to the city. This understanding enables motorcycle taxi drivers to fully capture the unequal structure of power underlying the street-level regulatory regime, especially in the context of a rapidly neoliberalizing local state:

At least in this case, I dare to say that the local government has served only the interests of the rich. It is true that now in Guangzhou there are so many rich people but there are even more who are poor and powerless... The local government has no ability to regulate the rich, so they prefer regulating the poor, because the poor have no power or resource to resist. Also, this policy has a large influence on us migrants. We have also made our

contribution to building up the prosperity of this city, but the government just ignores the difficult situation we are now facing because of this policy. (Interview 07112011B)

In the meantime, motorcycle taxi drivers also recognize a collective inability to contest the local state. In the contemporary political structure of China, there seems to be little space for subordinate urban social groups to directly question or challenge particular government policies. The unique political environment of China has significantly enhanced the local state's ability to enforce socially unjust programs of governmentality. To reconcile their anger over social injustice with this sense of collective disempowerment, many motorcycle taxi drivers ended up in blaming themselves for "not being rich enough" to be respected by the state. In these narratives, it is the migrant motorcycle drivers' own lack of personal qualities which has produced their subaltern status in an established social hierarchy; and it is the poor, the marginal who are responsible for their inability to pursue more decent and respectable ways of life:

I don't know who I can blame for this. The only thing that is to blame is that you are not doing well and you are not rich. In this world, you can only rely on your own labour and your own ability. They say motorcycles are illegal, and then be it. The rich people contribute to this society more than us, and the government makes policies in their favour. This logic is not entirely unreasonable in fact. (Interview 16112011A)

Such narratives exert immense discursive power in reproducing the subjectivity of motorcycle taxi drivers by re-asserting the taken-for-granted equation of personal wealth and economic power with individual merit and respectability. It also speaks to the ways in which the rhetoric of personal merit and responsibility is contributing to the ever intensifying hierarchization of Chinese urban society and the displacement of the concerns over the social injustices entrenched in China's emerging capitalist, neoliberalizing mode of production and consumption. This mentality of self-blaming needs to be understood in the context of both China's political environment and more importantly, the dominant *zeitgeist* in the post-reform Chinese society in which the ascending logic of private wealth is re-shaping the subjectivities of both dominant and subaltern social classes. This logic may be glimpsed from the rationalities of governmental programs, but it is also concretized in the beliefs, attitudes and worldviews of ordinary people. It naturalizes existing dichotomies of poor/rich, order/disorder, respectable/unrespectable and also constrains the marginal social groups' ability to envisage alternative structuring of social relations and a fully realized right to the city.



## Conclusion

Mooney (1999) argues that the production of social relations in the city always involves the demarcation of ordered/disordered, respectable/unrespectable, good/bad. By examining the tensions inherited in these bipolar oppositions, social groups and urban spaces are analyzed as the outcome of exclusion, differentiation, social conflicts and unequal power relations. Drawing from this trenchant contention, this chapter argues that it is exactly the attempt to envision and create order, civility and progressiveness which has produced dominant understandings of disorder, incivility and backwardness. This chapter has analyzed the role that everyday mobile practices can play in delineating the normative boundaries of inclusion/exclusion and also attempted to demonstrate how geographical imaginations of urban mobilities contribute to the visions of public space. Urban roads and streets are understood not as the passive physical settings which mobile subjects/objects pass through, but the key sites in which the mobile practices are discursively constituted. It is also a process in which unequal structures of social power are enacted by defining disorderly and unrespectable mobilities which are considered illegitimate to use urban space. If the right to the city, as Purcell (2008) conceptualizes, should be understood in relation to the attempts of those in power to manipulate spatial relations and produce hegemonic visions of space, dominant representations of urban mobilities work exactly to justify the imposition of dominant social relations upon the production of public space.

To ground the regulation of public streets into the domain of social formation and power enables us to conceptualize the governing of urban space as a historically contingent and dynamic process situated within specific cultural, social and political milieus. Such a perspective allows us to depart from the understanding of regulatory power of public space in terms of a rigid dichotomization of coercive domination and irresistible subordination. Instead, this chapter has spotlighted the central role that the Chinese state plays in managing competing interests in a post-reform, increasingly complicated Chinese society in order to build social consensus and achieve imagined common good. Here discourses and rationalities of regulatory practices are understood as active historical agents working towards the production of social relations and the ordering of spatial practices:

Discourses would thus be seen in a describable relationship with a set of other practices. Instead of having to deal with an economic, social or political history which encompasses a history of thought... instead of having to deal with a history of ideas attributed... to extrinsic conditions, one would be dealing with a history of discursive practices in the specific relationships which link them to other practices. It is not a matter of composing a *global history*... but rather of opening out a field of *general history* within which one

could describe the singularity of practices, the play of their relations, the form of their dependencies (Foucault, 1991b, p. 64)

In Guangzhou, the regulation of motorcycle taxis and urban streets is inextricably enmeshed in the emerging cosmopolitan identity of the city and the local elites' imagination of an ordered, rationalized and modernized urban future. As Huxley (2006) suggests, the governing of spatiality enables us to see the productive role that space can play in shaping social norms and political power. Motorcycle mobility, on the other hand, provided a discursive field in which specific locations, spaces and places were imagined and identified as problematic and in need of rationalization. As Osborne and Rose (1999, p. 738) suggest, space is always-already a social diagram – “a matter of discourse, of the immanent rules of formation – the regularities and distribution – that allow things to be said and understood about urban existence”. In this formulation, space is not conceived as a fixated order, but an emergence catalyzed by various practices and regulatory techniques (Osborne and Rose, 2004).

By examining the social construction of regulated space, we can also glimpse the historical contingency of urban citizenship. Such a perspective allows us to see citizenship as a site of struggles and political processes, rather than the assemblage of essential definitions and categorizations (Turner, 1993). As Marston and Mitchell (2004) contend, citizenship is a non-static, non-linear construction which is best understood within complex social, cultural, economic and political settings and in terms of a process of *citizenship formation*. In the case of motorcycle taxis, the exercise of disciplinary power opens up a lens through which we can understand how differentiated forms of citizenship are defined through the constitution of historically contingent discourses and the micro-level exercise of police power. Here it is necessary to engage again with Blomley's (2007a; 2007b; 2010; 2011) insightful analyses of the ways in which citizenship can be displaced by the rationales of regulatory power, yet *without* making any reference to the rhetoric of right and citizenship at all. In Guangzhou, government discourses are constantly framed into technologically rational or morally correct vocabularies which scale down the politics of space to immediate, ethically neutral and politically irrelevant street encounters.

Precisely because the regulation of public space is situated in so rich social, political, cultural and discursive processes, we need to avoid any simplistic moral judgement that the excessive exercise of regulatory power means that governmental officials or police officers are essentially “bad” people. Neither does it lead to the conclusion that public space is simply brought to death by the exercise of regulatory practices. On the contrary, governmental rationalities constitute a rather complex discursive and political space.

Dominant discourses and state actions may well reflect the municipal government's good intentions to care for bodily health, street security and the efficient use of space. But they are ethically problematic in terms of the role that they played in producing an unequal structure of right and power. Rationalities for regulation or the police morale are never a finished project, but constantly re-negotiated and re-asserted in the ongoing production of difference and otherness. There is a *doxic* dimension in regulatory practices, through which socially constructed notions, conceptions and ideas are taken for granted in micro-level social or political practices and incorporated into the construction of either dominant or marginalized social identities (Bourdieu, 1977).

## Chapter 7 Conclusion: re-visioning the public

We may draw some general conclusions on the nature of Assemblages from this. On a first, horizontal, axis, an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. One the hand it is a *machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both *territorial sides*, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of deterritorialization*, which carry it away. (Deleuze and Guattari, [1987]2004, pp. 97-98)

Everything is in a state of becoming. There are only events that affect you or not, with all of the necessary couplings and redistributions of energy, cast adrift in an “open ‘space-time’ in which there are no more identities but only transformations” (Lyotard, 1988b, p.31). It is always a matter of how to plug oneself into a milieu without choking off the infinite array of other modes of existence that could have been draw out of its event horizon. This is why even the most minimal of events can be unfolded, recomposed, and interpreted in innumerable ways. One will never be finished with the task of doing justice to the event: of reading and re-reading, of thinking and re-thinking, of repeating and differing.

.....

Everything is in perpetual motion, even if that vibration is often turned back on itself to simulate a constancy, consistency, or rhythmic cell...One can never know beforehand how an event will play out, spin out, and splay out, or with what other currents it will become swept up. (Doel, 1999, pp. 2-4)

### The relational imagination of public space

For Deleuze and Guattari ([1987]2004), assemblage is always an ongoing sequence of reterritorialization and deterritorialization, stability and becoming. The constituent entities, and the relations between them, create relative stasis and fixity, but the possibilities of disruption, transformation and *alternative* configurations are always-already implicated in these entities and relations. Thus for Doel (1999), space is conceived of in terms of chaos, uncertainty and excessive flows. Any specific articulation of space with social processes is merely one of myriads of possible configurations: no single possibility should be privileged over others. As Jonathan Murdoch (2006) argues, a relational conception of space enables us to understand geographical phenomena not as fixed and contained entities, but as “territories of becoming which produce new potentials” (Thrift, 2004, cited from Murdoch, 2006, p. 17). Such potentials arise from the ways in which social relations and spatial relations mutually intersect and constitute. Murdoch also proposed a valuable theoretical and conceptual framework for an open, flexible and non-essentialist understanding of space, the viewpoints in which I would like to summarize as follows:

- a. Spaces and places are not closed and contained. Spaces and places are crosscut by a variety of processes and practices. Some of them emanate from within, but some others penetrate into the construction of space and place from the outside.
- b. Spaces and places are multiplicities – that is, they are made of a diverse array of spatial practices, identifications and forms of belonging. The question of whose meanings and identities are prioritized opens up the possibilities of struggle and resistance.
- c. Social and cultural processes which constitute the production of space are neither unitary nor closed. New forms of spatial identity and new forms of spatial practice are always in the making. It is through performance and practice that the old are destabilized and the new are created.

Echoing McFarlane's (2011) arguments reviewed in Chapter 2 and Deutsche's (1996) imagination of the public sphere as an emptied space awaiting liberated discourses, I would like to envision public space as inherently "empty", too. There is no well established blueprint which determines the essential *nature* of space. Successive time-spaces are assembled or destroyed; and configurations of intersecting time-spaces are always decentred and dynamic.

In this thesis, the relational conception of space has served as a loose and broad guidance for me to think and rethink from time to time the notions of space and place. But we also need to acknowledge that in the analyses of concrete social, cultural and political realities, the production of space is usually less relational or fluid than Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida might have envisaged. When one particular space is severely regulated and privatized, it is more often than not that it will *indeed* be deprived of engaged participation and practice. In this case the entrenched structure of social relations and the social power it produces work together to strangle our imaginations of alternative configurations of time-spaces. However, what the relational conceptions of space are capable of telling us is that such a state of disengagement and despair is only *one* time-space that has been stabilized within the assemblages of entities and relations. It may be very difficult to "deterritorialize" this relative stability – to use Deleuze and Guattari's term – but this is by no means the *only* time-space which is able to contribute to the production and construction of space. There is always more than one set of entities and relations through which the social and the spatial become mutually constitutive.

Throughout my analyses in this thesis, it has not been my attempt to sidestep the regimes of social inequalities and the structures of uneven social power which constrain the kinds of

temporal-spatial trajectories which can actually *take place* (Doel, 1999) at an empirical level. But I have also been careful in orienting my analyses to ensure that no assumption or conclusion is disarticulated from the actual ways in which people practice and produce public spaces. In general, three approaches have informed my analyses and interpretations in this thesis. First of all, I have avoided assuming that there is a pre-given *nature* of any specific space that exists prior to actual practices. Any space is radically open to diverse ways of appropriation, and there is no fixated social and political meaning associated with a particular urban locale. Second, I have been insisting that there are not only one, but many geographies embedded in the production of public space. People, discourses and practices are related to each other not in one, but diverse ways. Different practices and relations are situated in tension with each other, creating both oppressive regimes and progressive potentials. Third and related to the first and second points, I have been reluctant to make any easy moral judgement of spaces. For example, can the gay cruising ground in People's Park be seen as a socially empowering and culturally emancipatory space? It seems that we cannot really give a unitary answer to this question. Instead, my point of view is that value judgements and ethical assessments of space cannot stand alone and be separated from the actual social and cultural dynamics. We need to analyze how exclusion and inclusion intersect with each other, and how the diverse configurations of inclusion and exclusion constitute the complex webs of knowledge, discourses, meanings, attitudes and subject positions.

This, of course, requires a different and less rigid approach for situating the normative ideals associated with public space into concrete everyday practices and experiences. Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have kept reckoning about why the study of public space has become a well defined research area. "Being public", after all, is only one of the many attributes that any particular space can bear in the same time. The social and cultural production of public space cannot be explained by a single set of theories and cannot be approached by a single set of analytical perspectives. There are, for example, studies which are only loosely articulated with the normative connotations of publicness and explore public spaces from the perspectives such as symbolic meanings and social memories (e.g. Johnson, 1994; 1995; 2002). In the studies of gender and sexualities public space is often analyzed from the perspectives of eroticism and liminality, rather than social interactions or claim making (e.g. Ingram *et al.*, 1997). Similarly, the studies aligned with symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology also have much to say beyond the civic and political ideals of public space (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Lofland, 1973). But if public space is everything then it is simultaneously nothing. Thus Orum and Neal (2010) have proposed three major themes

which arguably constitute the “mainstream” of public space research: public space as civic order; public space as power and resistance; and public space as art, performance and theatre. These three themes point to the issues of participation, sociality, expression and claim-making, all of which bear apparent traces of the two ideals of public space as civic humanism and as political forum.

It is my impression that at least in Anglophone human geography and urban studies it is most often these two ideals of public space that hold together a vast array of empirical realities to define the core of public space research: all of us should have a share of the public realm which facilitates social interactions and free expressions. Both of these normative ideals are immensely important and must stand as the ethical and ideological infrastructure for us to understand and interpret the social and cultural processes in public spaces. In this thesis although I have avoided making easy and rigid value judgements, both my choices of case studies and my analyses of them have been heavily informed and guided by the ideal of free participation in public social life. In Chapter 3 and Chapter 5, all those possibilities of performances and identity formations are certainly reliant upon the low degree of regulation and policing in the parks and square that I have examined. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 6, it has also been my ethical conviction that hegemonic norms and ideologies render public space exclusive and contribute to various forms of social inequalities.

The question which this thesis has raised, then, is how we can make value judgment of public space according to these ideals, while also taking into account the diverse entities and relations which co-constitute the public realm. Should we only focus on the moments in which these ideals are realized to the “full” extent or thoroughly sabotaged? Or is it the case that the ideals of inclusion and participation themselves are being constantly reformulated and renegotiated? In Chapter 6 I have suggested that for the local policy makers the “exclusion” of motorcycle taxi drivers is for the “inclusion” of those who are considered to be more sensitive to the collective interests of the society. Hence in those hegemonic policy narratives, inclusion and exclusion are not situated in a win-lose relationship, and there are more complex social and discursive dynamics cutting through the dividing line between inclusion and exclusion. Similarly, for the gay cruisers in Chapter 4 the exclusion of certain elements of gayness is expected to render possible the “inclusion” of “abnormal” sexual bodies. To position inclusion and exclusion at rigidly opposite ends leads to the unproductive conclusion that privatization and regulation simply deprives public space of its social and political significance.

My second aim in this thesis has been paying more attention to the moments of actual participation and engagement, rather than non-participation and disengagement. This stance

echoes with Watson's (2006) and Iveson's (2007) approaches which highlight the ways in which public space is made and practiced from below. With these approaches we would be able to develop new academic sensitivities and locate material spaces which still accommodate engaged practices and interactions. Sennett's (1977) and Habermas's (1989) lament over the decline of the traditional public sphere does not need to bring us to the impression that public social life has been reduced *quantitatively*, since social realities are too complex to be measured in this way. Both Sennett's and Habermas's arguments are empirically credible for sure. But as I have already argued in Chapter 2, these two authors' observations should not be interpreted in an epistemologically closed way because the public sphere is never a *fait accompli*. If we trace the nuanced rhythms and textures of the social and cultural processes which condition the construction of public space, a more complex picture arises. Some might argue that the public realm lost in the West can be rediscovered in the East or the Third World. My research in this thesis does not conflict with this viewpoint, but in my view the situation is more complex than this dichotomy of East and West. It is my assumption that even in the West there are still rich possibilities for social actors to appropriate and produce socially relevant and culturally meaningful public spaces. Many of these spaces, social relations and meanings emerge and are encountered in unexpected ways, creating what Massey (2005) calls the moments of "surprise".

It is true that when a particular public space cannot fulfil its intended missions it would suddenly lose its privileged place in our social and geographical imaginations. But there are always new possibilities and new formations. Staeheli (1996) and Staeheli and Mitchell (2008), for example, have destabilized the one-to-one associations between public space/private space and public sphere/private sphere: public sphere can accommodate various private interests and public actions very often take place in private space. In other words, both private and public spaces are filled with more chances and possibilities than we previously imagined. And certainly, the shifting and fluid configuration of public/private is just one aspect of the kaleidoscopic stories that public space is capable of telling.

## **Revisiting the chapters in this thesis**

In line with the above summary of my theoretical stances, I will now revisit briefly the five substantive chapters (Chapters 2-6) in this thesis. The purpose of my research has been to *locate* the public realm in a post-reform Chinese metropolis with a focus on the *practices* of public space. In Chapter 2 I have set up a guiding perspective for my following analyses and made the argument that public social life features complex improvisations of social relations,



production of cultural meanings, and performances of identities. One's entry into the public realm *per se* cannot guarantee anything; and my interest in this thesis has focused on the *multiple publics* which write and rewrite the narratives engraved in public landscapes in their own ways.

All the social relations and practices that I have examined need to be understood in the specific social, cultural and political contexts of contemporary urban China. On the one hand, the Chinese state continues to exert tight control over conventional public forums. Public protests are mobilized from time to time, but in most cases they are centred on particular concerns and do not challenge the existing structure of social power. During my fieldwork in Guangzhou I joined several times the New-Left, anti-GM activists in leafleting in the streets. Each time our actions were closely monitored, policed and even prohibited. Also, in People's Park one retired university professor who gave critical comments on Chinese government's policies was arrested and detained for a few days before the 2010 Asian Games took place in Guangzhou. For this reason, I had to set foot on those tranquil urban parks and locate alternative geographies of political solidarity in the sites of red song singing. On the other hand, in the post-reform urban China the meanings of public spaces are also being rapidly reshaped. A limited extent of political liberalization has created some opportunities of practices and social interactions in urban spaces which are not considered by the state to be confrontational or potentially trouble-making. Grassroots social members, on the other hand, mobilize their agencies and cultural resources to speak back to the unprecedented social and cultural transformations. The empirical situations documented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are actually all manifest of Chinese state's withdrawal from the direct control of certain public social spaces. But in the meantime, new discourses and visions of urban space have also come into play. The intensifying social polarization and the pursuits of modernity and progress have been inscribed in the imagination and production of urban spaces, as shown in Chapter 6.

Throughout the urban history of China public space has certainly been used as the site of inter-personal communications and social activities (notably commerce and rituals) (Skinner, 1977; Heng, 1999; Zhu, 2004; Friedmann, 2005). Yet, as many commentators have observed traditional Chinese urbanism was much more oriented toward enclosed family or community space than the realm of publicness (Skinner, 1977; Knapp, 2000). Also, the Chinese state (not only the communist party state) has continued to be anxious about public life and public association. Thus a focus on the actually existing practices enabled me to avoid the reductionist conclusion that there is simply no active public realm in China. My viewpoint thus concurs with Orum *et al.*'s (2009) observation that the public man is extant and active in

contemporary Chinese cities. In the meantime, I have also tried not to exoticize the Chinese experiences and to view public space, either Western or Eastern, as a constantly becoming assemblage of relations, practices and meanings.

In general, I have employed my empirical analyses in this thesis to shed light on two major arguments. First, this thesis has made attempts to challenge the binary oppositions of inclusion and exclusion, presence and absence. It is my argument that inclusion and exclusion are not two mutually separate domains. On the one hand, inclusion and exclusion penetrate into the construction of each other and in many cases they are mutually constitutive. As I have argued earlier, every public space is inscribed with ideologies, discourses and meanings. The ideal of absolute inclusion and unfettered social interaction can never be realized to the full extent. Throughout history the configuration of inclusion/exclusion is an ongoing struggle over the privileged position to speak in the name of truths and normativity. Even if public space is not eroded by the regime of capital accumulation and commodity relations, performances of more subtle boundaries of difference may be always extant. These boundaries are enacted, performed and also shifted through mundane practices. Space is thus divided into loosely defined territories of identities which other groups are normally careful not to trespass on.

Very often the enactment of boundaries does not result in the enclosure of space but operates with more subtle mechanisms. In other cases, boundaries of identities and difference may not be hegemonic in a conventional sense, and sometimes it is through the maintenance of non-hegemonic boundaries that peaceful coexistence and interactions are perpetuated. As Derrida (2000) has pointed out, in everyday social relations we often observe the finitude, rather than the erasure, of boundaries. In People's Park and North Gate Square, cultural boundaries are enacted between those performing high-quality dancing those practicing carnivalesque entertainments. But when each group's cultural identity is tolerated and respected, if not actively engaged, at least those boundaries would not lead to deepened exclusion of public space. Meanwhile, as I have already touched upon earlier, in dominant discourses exclusion is often justified on the ground that it facilitates the better "inclusion" of the more responsible and respectable parts of the society. In these narratives, inclusion and exclusion are considered to be mutually enabling, and it is through the co-constitution and "co-articulation" (McFarlane, 2011) of exclusion and inclusion that social inequalities are produced.

On the other hand, I have also tried to elaborate the idea that the production of repression or exclusion does not necessarily render public space socially and politically irrelevant. It is surely the case that even regulated public spaces are not completely deprived of engaged

practices which are not subsumed under the hegemonic definitions of manipulated spaces. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 6, either the gay men or the motorcycle taxi drivers are not reduced to passive victims of dominant discourses or regulatory practices. Instead, they are active agents in negotiating and orienting their actions and subject positions in a culturally unfriendly environment. Some of their practices are co-opted with hegemonic knowledge and power (especially in Chapter 4), but resistant potentials are also implicated in their entry into, and appropriation of, the public realm.

Also, I have dedicated even more energy to underline the idea that in many cases it is precisely through contestations and struggles that public spaces are re-placed at the centre of civic and political life. Public space is the central arena in which competing meanings, attitudes and discourses come into play; and it is through the re-definition and reproduction of public space that social and cultural fabrics are shaped and consolidated. Here struggles, conflicts and regulations are understood in terms of the complex *rationales*, *actions* and *practices* which constitute the identities of space and place. As Sharp *et al.* (2000) have argued, social groups excavate their purchase upon social power from real social encounters and social interactions. Thus no rationale justifying the exclusion of public space is pre-given, monolithic or universal. On the contrary, it is always open to new discursive configurations and new geographical imaginations which in turn incubate the potentials of resistance.

Related to the first argument, the second argument that I have been trying to foreground in this thesis is that there is no fixed set of public spaces which accommodate fixed uses and produce fixed social and political meanings. There is no pre-given definition or form of public space where determines *from above* its social and political nature. Rather, public associations happen at the intersections of spatial settings, historical contexts and immediate social relations. It is practices *from below* which create diverse social, cultural and political dynamics. At any given moment, the identity of space and place expresses a state of relative stability, but this state of relative stability is always-already subject to destabilization and reconstruction.

This argument can be further deconstructed into two points of view at the empirical level. First, it is as important to locate urban sites which still accommodate engaged practices and participation as to criticize the decline of public realm in other locales. It is not to romanticize uncritically some places on the margin (Shields, 1991), but to expand the scope of our imaginations of urban life. Neither do I suggest any rigid distinction between lively, vibrant public spaces and those suppressed and “dead” ones: hegemonic regimes of control and oppression can be destabilized, and disengaged public space can be activated under

specific conditions through appropriation and practices. Second, any public space is constituted of diverse temporal-spatial trajectories and multiple publics (Fraser, 1990). Those time-spaces which do not fit with the principle definition of one given space can nonetheless contribute to its production and construction.

In chapter 2, I have proposed an ideal-predicament-practice framework to understand the current literature in the study of public space. I have first reviewed the two normative ideals associated with public space: public space as the forum for free expression and political negotiation, and public space as the physical setting for unfettered social interaction and the negotiation of difference. Thus my understanding and definition of public space are not situated in property relations or the topography of fixed sites and geographical locations. Instead, I approach public space from its intended social and political significance and narrow the focus of my research upon the relationships between the normative ideals of public space and the social dynamics which consolidate or sabotage these ideals. The inquiry then flows logically to the question of whether these ideals can actually be realized in concrete everyday social life. Unfortunately, a large amount of existing studies have portrayed the “death” or the “end” of public space. Three phenomena have been extensively reviewed: the decline of collective social life, the privatization of public space, and the regulation of public space. Most of the empirical realities examined in these studies are concerned with the ways in which capitalist relations of economy and consumption reshape our civic engagements and redefine the right to the public space. While I acknowledge that these studies are empirically grounded and analytical solid, I have also warned against rigid and epistemologically closed ways of interpreting the empirical findings in them. As I have discussed earlier, the rhetoric of the end of public space constructs the binary oppositions of inclusion and exclusion, presence and absence. It also understands the social and political relevance of public space in terms of fixated topographies and fixated practices.

In particular, Chapter 2 makes references to two dangers to analysis that the same rhetoric can engender. First, this rhetoric sidesteps the fact that public space is intrinsically the arena of contestations, conflicts and struggles. Normative ideals are not simply moral imperatives, but also social products. Both the civic and political ideals of public space are situated in the complex dynamics of social relations and by no means immune to the structures of social power. Second, the rhetoric of the end of public space also favours fixed and enclosed understandings, and forecloses our imaginations of *alternative* time-spaces in public spaces as well as the possibilities of appropriation, destabilization and reconstruction.

The theoretical framework which Chapter 2 sets up is followed by the four empirical chapters. In Chapter 3, I have chosen to look at two socially inclusive and culturally benign

public spaces, and examined the everyday leisure, entertainment and cultural activities which are spontaneously organized by grassroots social members and groups and stay largely outside direct state intervention. Though recognizing the role that everyday cultural activities play in facilitating social interaction and promoting community cohesion, Chapter 3 places its focus on the possibilities of performativity emergent from social interactions and examines how fluid, unessential identity positions are displayed through corporeal engagements, symbolic ecologies as well as discursive constructions. By capturing the performative displays of cultural identities in everyday urban space, Chapter 3 also analyzes the new, albeit temporary, social relations emergent from and immanent in mundane spatial practices.

The purposes of Chapter 3 are threefold. First and quite simply, it aims to provide a counter-narrative to the apocalyptic accounts of city life and locate certain city spaces which are still fundamentally inclusive and socially progressive despite the current ascendancy of neoliberal urban governance in major Chinese cities. It is through ordinary people's uses and practices that the two urban sites which I examined are conceived of as shared and cherished centres of social life to which the access is granted to all the *inhabitants* of the city (Lefebvre, 2003; Purcell, 2003), including the rural migrants who are normally excluded from other spheres of urban life. Second, Chapter 3 attempts to show that space is rendered socially and culturally significant not only because social members are allowed to be *present* or *seen* in the public. Instead, the diverse possibilities of interpersonal relations and the rich cultural meanings that public space is capable of engendering emerge from engaged practices and performances. Third, Chapter 3 also evidences that public space accommodates many, rather than one, time-spaces. The heterogeneity of temporal-spatial trajectories in public space cannot be explained simply by the logic of social inclusion. Some of these time-spaces are mutually reinforcing, creating new possibilities of encounters and engagements. Some, on the other hand, may be in tension with each other, enacting new cultural boundaries and restricting social inclusion being realized to the full extent.

To avoiding romanticizing social life in China's urban public space, I depart from the moments of harmonious coexistence and mutual engagements portrayed in Chapter 3, and switch my focus to the tensions and contestations in which public social life always inheres. In Chapter 4, I examined the relationship between gay men's cruising and the construction of gay subjectivity in Guangzhou's People's Park. In particular, I have interrogated the complex dynamics between gay people's interpretation of a homosexual identity as deviancy and the dominant hetero-normative ideology inscribed in the construction of public space. I have articulated how public cruising place can be mobilized as a space of alternative socio-

spatial ordering and simultaneously a closeted space for the gay cruisers to experience and re-assert the hegemonic public-private divide and hetero-normativity. In People's Park, gay men attempt to reconcile gay subjectivities in public space with the established boundaries of deviancy/normalcy, public/private. The production of a self-disciplining subject is centred on the gay people's discursive construction of acting in a "low-profile" way in public space.

Echoing with Chapter 3, Chapter 4 also sheds light on the argument that there are multiple time-spaces implicated in the social construction of public space. Although gay men in People's Park are not coercively excluded by formal regulation and policing, their inclusion into the public realm is far from unconditional. Rather, complex discourses, knowledge and social norms work together to delineate the boundaries of appropriate behaviours and modes of social interactions. Thus this empirical chapter challenges the binary opposition of inclusion and exclusion, and destabilizes the one-to-one association between inclusion/exclusion and good/bad. My argument is that being present or included in the public is not automatically translatable to empowerment or potentials for socially progressive mutual engagements. For marginal groups who are often excluded from the right to present their values and identities in public space, being in the public is to enter new sets of social relations which they need to constantly negotiate. As I have reiterated a few times in this thesis, every space is ideologically laden. Space is implicated in all the microscopic encounters and the ways in which these encounters actually take place.

To foreground my focus on spatial practices in everyday life a step further, Chapter 5 turned to the issue of political association and political identity in public space. It argues that public space is not only the physical setting in which pre-programmed political expressions take place. Rather, politicized public space is always *made* through actions and practices. The sites of collective red song singing examined in Chapter 4 seem to be the most unlikely spaces for the formation and expression of political identities: they are primarily defined as spaces of leisure, and they do not stand in opposition to the Chinese state. As Chapter 5 has shown, most participants in the singing of red songs are positioned in fairly ambivalent relations to the Chinese state. But political identity and solidarity are nonetheless formulated through performances and inter-subjective communications. In a sense, the sites of red song singing resemble those improvised public spheres portrayed in Laurier and Philo (2007) and Cooper (2006): the public sphere is not merely built upon rational debates and negotiations, but rather the ongoing production, contestation and exchange of ideas and meanings.

Thus Chapter 5 attempts to present an analysis of how specific cultural experiences and political identities can be constructed and performed through public singing in the actual *formation* of an active grassroots public. It uses the conceptual constructs of "public" and

“counterpublic” as analytical points of entry. It approaches these two concepts from the actions, practices and shared meanings which render the grassroots public sphere visible and concrete. It conceives of the public as a shared physical or discursive space emerging from below. It combines the perspectives of public space, performativity and popular culture to narrate the formation of grassroots public. The interplay of cultural hegemony embedded in the socialist “red songs” and the ordinary singers’ agency in re-interpreting and re-reading has shaped the fluidity and complexity in the production of cultural meanings. In Guangzhou, the red-song singers do not simply re-assert the party-state’s political legitimacy by expressing their political allegiance via the red songs. More significantly, they also reconstruct and re-appropriate the meanings intrinsically woven into the red songs to critically reflect upon the social, cultural and moral transformations, as well as the new cultural and ethical *zeitgeists* in the post-reform Chinese society.

Finally, Chapter 6 engages with the issue of the regulation of public space and examines how the practice of hegemonic power leads to the relative “end” of public space. By “relative” I mean that the regime of hegemonic power itself is not a closed system: it is situated in the complex networks of social relations and cultural identities, and it is also inevitably open to resistance and change. Chapter 6 also corresponds with the already shibboleth argument that space is always inscribed with ideological meanings, but this time I have tried to elucidate this argument in a different way. I have argued that social members’ legally defined entitlement to be present in the public is not naturally equivalent to social inclusion. The discourses and rationales undergirding the exercise of regulatory power can be formulated with purely technological and utilitarian lexicons, while avoiding making any direct reference to the questions of right, social equality and citizenship. Thus it is not your legal entitlement, but your *own behaviours* which determine whether or not you are allowed to share space with others. As a result, for the justification of governmental practices the visions and representations of space are inextricably intertwined with the production of discourses and knowledge. Precisely because public space is so central to our understandings of social relations and cultural norms, the contestation and conflict over the right to space leads to the re-centring, rather than the annihilation, of its social and political relevance.

The empirical analyses in Chapter 6 have engaged with three separate, yet interrelated terrains of inquiry. First, it argues that both motorcycle mobility and the motorcycle taxi are socially produced categories made visible and intelligible through the state-led programmes to ground them in a terrain of constructed knowledge. Second, it is also argued that the production of morally charged representations and knowledge catalyzes the spatialization of regulatory power and the enactment of spatial barriers. For this reason, Chapter 6 also

examined the street-level regulatory practices of the local state and how these practices result in the restructuring of social relations and local state power. Related to the first and second points, Chapter 6 has also been interested in the marginalized motorcycle taxi drivers' identity and subjectivity shaped by the spatialization of state regulatory power. Motorcycle taxi drivers are by no means detached from the field of discourses, knowledge and representations. They orient their behaviours and subject positions according to the rhetoric of danger, inefficiency and criminality, but in the same time produce counter-narratives which disrupt the taken-for-granted coherence of dominant knowledge. In both the production of discourses and the exercise of regulatory power, space is the axis around which competing visions and ideologies are shaped as well as a constituent element in the production of social difference and the relations of power.

### **The ideals will live**

In concluding this final chapter, I would like to make it clear that while my thesis has made efforts to destabilize the binary oppositions of inclusion and exclusion, presence and absence, it is not my aim to reject the normative civic and political ideals associated with public space. As I have claimed earlier, the analyses in this thesis have always been informed and guided by these ideals; and throughout the thesis I have been trying to foreground those possibilities and moments of interactions and engagements. My argument, instead, is that the realization of these ideals does not necessarily follow the logics and perspectives which the rhetoric of the end of public space can provide. We need to break away from the spatial fetishism which equates spatial openness to progressiveness, and enclosure to despair. The social and political imagination of "good" public space must be built upon more nuanced conceptualizations. A good public space should not be defined according to the divides of exclusion and inclusion, absence and presence. It may not be even possible to provide an exhaustive definition whatsoever. Instead, the "*being-good*" of public space refers to the socially progressive potentials which everyday space incubates and which are always crosscut by the dynamisms of social relations and social power.

As this thesis has been arguing, exclusion and inclusion are often entangled with each other, and operate through more subtle mechanisms. Spatially open and inclusive spaces are not immune to the working of power and social relations. And spatially exclusive spaces do not necessarily eradicate the possibilities of engagement and interaction (This is a point of view which needs to be more fully elaborated through empirical materials in my future research). Also, what is *absent* in certain locations and at certain moments can be rendered



*present* through practices and actions. Therefore this thesis would like to conceptualize the dual constructions of inclusion and exclusion, presence and absence as ongoing social dynamics which are configured and reconfigured through practices, rather than fixed bipolar structures which are automatically translated to value assessment or ethical judgements.

It is probably arguable that the ideals of public space are not as deeply engraved in Chinese people's imagination of urbanism as in the Anglo-European tradition. Yet, I still believe that a shared public realm of expression and social interaction is to the benefit of Chinese urban people, especially given the rapid restructuring of social relations and reconfiguration of social ties in the post-reform era. China's recent urban history, from Tiananmen Square to the revival of collective activities in public spaces, has not contradicted this belief. But the realization of these ideals may not follow a unidirectional route. In the first place, it is *not easy* to envisage these ideals being fully realized. In Guangzhou, many urban locales demonstrate fairly impressive potentials for incubating the socially progressive moment of thrown-togetherness (Massey, 2005), as seen in Chapters 3 and 5. But in others cases, such as those in Chapters 4 and 6, dominant knowledge and power have eroded the possibilities for equal right to the city. We need to bear in mind that in most cases the ideal public space is not merely the bonus of good urban planning and urban policies. It rests upon the microcosms of social relations and the ways in which we navigate those immediate interactions and encounters. Improvised social barriers and fluid lines of difference always rise and fall in public social life. As Watson (2006) has implied, the first step that we need to take is to insert a spirit of tolerance, communication, engagement and eventually respect into our encounters with othered social groups, even if the established hierarchies of wealth and power cannot be destabilized in the short run.

And we also need to note that regulation and exclusion, on the other hand, are not simply imposed from above. Very often regulation resides in our taken-for-granted understandings of social life: heterosexuality is considered the "right" way to live; and we tend to accept the viewpoint that urban streets should be used for more effective and civilized purposes. Our modes of everyday interactions and our ethical assessments of social processes are all entangled with dominant representations and knowledge. When rationales of exclusion are framed in this way, it would be difficult to resist the "good will" of those in power. But precisely because the construction of public space is enmeshed in the dominant knowledge of our society, it is *always possible* for us to envision *alternative* framings of discourses and create socially and politically more progressive spaces to accommodate the diversity in everyday life. This will entail the destabilization of those taken-for-granted ways of living

and regimes of knowledge as well as a re-evaluation of all the values that the public space currently bears.

## **Appendix I Notes on methods and fieldwork experiences**

### **The basic approach**

During my fieldwork and data analyses, the basic approach which I have adopted is premised on the recognition that data collected from the field, as well as the interpretation of them, are implicated in social interactions which destabilize from time to time pre-established ideas, understandings and values. Recent advancement in social sciences research methods has made substantial efforts to challenge the asymmetrical power relations between the researcher as a detached, value-free extractor of “realities” and the researched as a passive vessel of answers (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). In this research, I see the encounters between the researcher and the researched as embedded in complicated and shifting grids of social relations and interactions. I also view the concepts, ideas and meanings generated in the research process as products of social encounters which are themselves situated in ongoing social dynamics. In so doing, I am aware that a situated approach for doing qualitative research entails the production of knowledge from a variety of positions and also significant investments of personal feelings and emotions (Pile, 1991; 1993). Thus I dismiss the masculinist notions of neutrality and objectivity (Oakley, 1981), and instead view the research data as a social construction embedded in the real world and also as expressions of contextualized discourses and languages (Mason, 2002; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

Bearing in mind this contextuality of data and the necessity for interactive negotiation in doing social research, it is essential to acknowledge that the production of knowledge is always situated in particular social interactions and therefore both contingent and partial (Merrifield, 1995; Staeheli and Lawson, 1994). The researcher’s privileged position to speak for others must not be separated from the acknowledgement that we cannot fully know and represent the experiences of the researched (England, 1994). In this sense, our interpretation of the life and experiences of the researched is mediated by our own established frameworks of understanding and knowledge as well as the ongoing social interactions between the researcher and the researched.

But as Staeheli and Lawson (1994) have argued, the partiality and situatedness of academic knowledge don’t simply imply social and cultural relativism. It does not need to lead us to thoroughly dismiss the legitimacy and competence of academics to represent and explain the social world. What is essential, therefore, is to dispense with the myth of pure objectivity and make efforts to reduce the biases and distortions in representation and understanding. Thus a number of authors have advocated self-reflexivity in social research (Robson, 2002; England, 1994; McDowell, 1992) which is expected to guide the researchers

to discover how their particular roles, identities and subject positions may shape the process of research and orient the drawing of research conclusions. As Moss (1995a) has noted, we need to excavate the material conditions, meanings, discourses, attitudes and social relations which are relevant to particular research projects from the locations of “multiple truths” (p. 444). Or as England (1994) puts it more straightforwardly, reflexivity is a “self-critical, sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (p. 82). Thus reflexivity entails taking into account how the researcher’s self is implicated in all the processes of interpretation and analysis. Reflexivity is employed to rethink upon how our location in the social structure influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research project and how we interpret and write our research (England, 1994; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Tonkiss, 2004).

Both McDowell (1992) and England (1994) have employed the vocabulary of inter-subjectivity to argue that social research concerns the shared meanings and interpersonal relationships between the researcher and the researched. It is contended that these two parties are engaged in real or constructed dialogues. Knowledge is co-produced through the mutual exchange of meanings, ideas and viewpoints (Schoenberger, 1991; 1992; Moss, 1995b). Extending beyond the emphasis on social interactions and idea exchanges, we also need to note that the subject of the researcher should not be viewed as pre-given and frozen in established positions and identities. Instead, the researcher’s own views, ideas, interpretations and values are constantly in formation and always open to the challenges from the researched. This issue is best addressed by Gillian Rose (1997) who argues that the situated boundary between the researcher and the researched can be crossed and self-reflexivity is more about self-construction than self-discovery (*ibid*, p. 313). Identity and subject positions are considered to be “based on *difference* from others but not on separation from others” (*ibid*, p. 314, original emphasis). They do not exist in isolation but implicated in constitutive and productive social relations. They are made and remade through the research process as a social event (Crang, 2003).

The employment of inter-subjectivity renders possible “the unconscious expulsion, or projection, of unwanted psychic material, from oneself onto external others” (Bondi, 2003, p. 69). This mutual projection creates a moment in which the researcher is neither overwhelmed nor unmoved by what the researched have presented. It also allows the researcher to sympathize with the researched, while maintaining the capacity to critically think about and analyze the constructed accounts and discourses. This process of subject reconstruction during research projects may also contribute to the pragmatic end of research

which is expected to mobilize agencies of the researchers and the researched and activate more substantive social actions (Smith, 1984; Rose, 1993; Katz, 1994).

Overall, throughout my research I was guided by the viewpoint that similarity or difference between the researcher and the researched is not pre-given but constructed and formed through context-specific social relations and exchanges. I found this approach particularly relevant to my research as I studied certain types of marginalized social groups, for example gay people in public spaces. While the social and cultural difference between me and the researched were not easily overcome, during my research I did not abandon the potential that experiences, ideas and emotional feelings of the other can project onto my own positions and understanding, which could challenge pre-established frameworks of interpretations and generate new views and insights.

The final point I would like to foreground is my firm hold onto the notion of *social reality*, which prevented my research from stepping into a pure cultural and discursive relativism. Silverman (1997, p. 240) has warned against reducing social reality into simply literal and discursively constructed forms by arguing “If I want to read a good poem, why on earth should I turn to a social science journal?” In my thesis, I will adopt the approach proposed by Robson (2002) which suggests that there should be general theories about what action would lead to what outcome in the real world, even though our understanding of particular mechanisms must be contingent upon variable contexts and conditions. As Robson (2002, p. 38) puts it, “social actions can only be understood in terms of a place within different strata or layers of social reality”. This commitment to social reality also corresponds to the appeal for validity and rigor in qualitative studies (Baxter and Eyles, 1997; Valentine, 2006; Tracy, 2010; Bailey *et al.*, 1999). Rigor and validity of qualitative studies can be conceived of in terms of the interpretations of social and cultural phenomena which are agreed between researchers and the researched, and between different examiners of the same sets of qualitative data and materials. Although anyone’s understandings of social realities are intrinsically mediated and constructed, we need to note that people do share important understandings and interpretations of the social world. Therefore in my research I would keep a faith to the notion of “social reality”, although the idea of reality itself does not need to be understood as a neutral, unmediated entity which simply lies *over there*.

## **Methods of research**

As I have already indicated briefly in the four empirical chapters, in this thesis materials and data came from a variety of sources and the techniques employed to obtain data are also diverse. Yet, three most important research methods have constituted the foundation of the

data collection and analysis in this research, namely qualitative interview, critical discourse analysis, and non-participant observation.

***Qualitative interview:*** In-depth qualitative interview is the primary research method which I employed for collecting firsthand qualitative data. The interview method, as Valentine (2005) once commented, is generally believed to be sensitive to rich social realities and also people-oriented. It is employed to understand the research subjects' deep experiences and emotional feelings, and to make sense of their own ideas and perspectives. Recent theoretical orientations in interview research conceptualize the interview process in terms of the active involvement of the respondents in the joint construction of discursive data (Punch, 2005). As feminist and postmodernist perspectives of interview research have noted, to conceptualize the interview as a social event is to highlight the moments of sharing, interaction and exchange in interview process. These interactive moments transform the researcher and the researched into co-creators of research data (Rapley, 2004; Winchester, 1996). Thus the interview process can be viewed as a "discursive repertoire" (Byrne 2004): the researcher and the researched develop a collaborative relationship and make sense of discursive meanings in a mutually interactive way (McDowell, 1992). Both Winchester (1996) and Rapley (2004) advocate that certain kinds of mutual disclosure and meaning sharing are necessary in interviews. The ideal form of in-depth interview is achieved when the interviewer and the interviewee follow closely each other's talk in order to develop a sense of "intimate reciprocity" (Rapley, 2004: 23). Rubin and Rubin (2005) also highlight a conversational partnership in interviews, suggesting that a mutually supportive interview relationship involves revealing oneself and constantly moving between the roles of inquirer and respondent.

Therefore in my research I have adopted what Holstein and Gubrium (1995; 2004) advocate as the *active interview* approach. This approach acknowledges that the interview creates a moment of performativity (Schostak, 2006) and knowledge is produced through the negotiations of the shifting roles played by the interviewer and interviewee. This model of interview takes into account the agency of the interviewees in constructively adding to, taking away from and transforming constructed facts (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 8; Seidman, 2006). Hence the interview process is viewed as an "interpersonal drama" (Pool, 1957, c.f. Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 14) in which there is "an understanding of friendly feelings and intimacy, to optimize cooperative, mutual disclosure and a creative search for mutual understanding" (Douglas 1985, c.f. Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 13). Data drawn from qualitative interviews, therefore, are situated discourses and meanings which arise from

the negotiations and interactions between the interviewers and the respondents (Fontana and Frey, 2005).

This emphasis on mutuality in the interview process is related to the hope that the intensive, reciprocal exchange of feelings, attitudes and experiences may help build up shared views and ideas between the interviewer and the interviewee. Both Kvale (2006) and Tanggaard (2007) have foregrounded the agonistic aspect of interview, with which interview is not experienced as the social site in which consensus is reached but a “battlefield” in which contradictory understandings can come into conflicts and mutual play. Thus the respondents in the interview process may challenge the interviewer’s understandings, views and positions. Both the interviewer and the respondent constantly cross the social boundary which constitutes the inquirer/respondent division. I found this approach fairly useful for my research as I interviewed certain marginalized social groups whose cultural distance from my own social and cultural position was considerable. As a well-educated and culturally “mainstream” postgraduate student who was from a middle-class social background, I could not guarantee that my understandings of the interview data could accurately reflect the broad social, cultural and political time-spaces which conditioned those social groups’ lives, perspectives and experiences. So I found it necessary to allow ample room for interviewees to give statements and counterstatements in the joint construction of knowledge and viewpoints.

Thus during my research I was generally committed to a cyclical and recursive process of doing interviews. In a normal case I would enter the field without imposing on my interviewees any *a priori* point of view or conception. I did use some outlines of research questions to orient my interactions with the respondents. But at the initial stage of any case study I would stay loyal to a grounded theory approach. This means that I only listed some broad research concerns and questions, as well as the questions aiming at collecting background information about the research settings, in my interview outlines. As the interview proceeded, I would normally start from a few broad and general questions. Then I would try to access the interviewee’s more detailed descriptions about the situation which I was trying to examine and asked them to express their own ideas, viewpoints and judgements. However, as a researcher I always carried with myself some pre-established theoretical and interpretative frameworks. To reduce my biases in interpretation I always preferred sharing my views, understandings and tentative conclusions with the interviewees. Unsurprisingly, in many cases my views and ideas were severely contested and opposed. This rendered possible more in-depth exchanges of ideas between my interviewees and me. Thus the interviews I conducted often appeared to be an active process of mutual discussion

and dialogue, rather than a passive Q & A session. In this process I was certainly an active extractor or constructor of social “realities”. But in the meantime I often felt like a humble *learner* who attempted to overcome his ignorance by absorbing, but also critically assessing, diverse views, positions and ideas.

I benefited from the dialogicality in interviews in two aspects. First, it often helped me to narrow down the focuses of my research questions and locate more effectively the centres of meanings which were most relevant to people which I attempted to research. Thus as the research process went on I was able to devise new interview questions which were more focused and more in-depth. Second, mutuality in interviews also prompted me to continuously modify or even abandon certain questions in my interview outlines, as those questions were considered by my interviewees as unimportant, irrelevant or inappropriate. Therefore the hope for a once-and-for-all research outline became but untenable throughout my research. As a result some participants in my research were interviewed more than once in order to consult their ideas with newly crafted or revised research questions. This is not to say that I was hijacked by my interviewees and lost hold onto any theoretical and analytical contour. In many cases I also challenged the views of my interviewees. Sometimes agonistic exchanges even resulted in unsolvable tensions and quarrels between me and interviewees. For example, after listening for half an hour to one gay man’s self-construction of deviancy and immorality (see Chapter 4) I decided to contest his views by trying to persuade him that homosexuality should be viewed as a legitimate social and cultural identity. I was not successful and the interview ended up in an even widened gap between our points of view. It was, of course, an extremely rare occasion because rapport in conversations was desired not only by me but also my interviewees. But these occasions nonetheless allowed me to look more deeply at the perspectives and subjective worlds of those social actors which I was attempting to examine.

I used two methods to analyze the data collected from my interviews. The first method was the approach of critical discourse analysis which I will discuss shortly in details. The second method employed followed the classic approach in qualitative research which aims at building up categories and logical relations from a set of open codes. When interpreting my interview data, I first coded the narratives presented in the interview transcripts. Each open code was concerned with a very narrowly focused meaning, description or representation. After this initial step, I grouped all the open codes into a number of categories and themes. Finally, I identified how the meanings contained in various themes and categories were interconnected with each other in order to build up the logical relations between them. This helped me to come to terms with broader theoretical and conceptual constructs which



constituted the foundations of my arguments in this thesis. For example, in Chapter 4 I first extracted a series of open codes and categorized them into a set of themes such as gay dancing, the internalization of stigmas, cottaging, criminal behaviours, *etc.* These themes enabled me to construct the conceptual framework in this chapter and develop my arguments in terms of broader registers such as self-construction of deviancy and self-disciplining subjectivity.

Overall, I tried to analyze the interview data in an open-ended way (Seale, 2004) so as to make sure that my interpretations of data were not constrained by pre-established theories and extant empirical studies. Certainly the arguments arising from this grounded theory approach did not necessarily contradict well established theories, but the ways in which these arguments were configured were not confined within fixed concerns, questions and hypotheses. I attempted to situate the codes and categories which I developed into theoretically informed research questions and the empirical situations expressed in the data (Kitchen and Tate, 2000). In the same time, however, we also need to note that analyzing qualitative data is never straightforward. The construction of codes, themes and categories is actually a fairly subjective process (Crang, 2005). It is tainted by the researcher's own identities and pre-established understandings of the social world. More importantly, I need to frankly acknowledge that the already established literature and theoretical frameworks always guides and shapes my empirical analyses. A large amount of the data is collected also because these bits of information can be more easily located in well established frameworks of understanding. The continuous interplays between the deductive and inductive approaches in analyses render the reading of qualitative data anything but unilinear. Thus the interpretation of qualitative data is necessarily a recursive and reflective process. We need to constantly go back to previous analyses to correct and refine the themes and findings emerging from the research process.

***Critical Discourse analysis:*** The analyses of interview data, as well as other textual data such as collected governmental documents, were conducted mainly through critical discourse analysis. The purposes of my data collection were concerned with the production and transformation of social categories, identities and cultural meanings as well as the constructed knowledge, attitudes and ideologies in relation to the multiple representations of the social world. Thus I found critical discourse analysis an effective approach to investigate diverse social and cultural positions and their relations to the meanings of space and place.

Foucault's contributions to excavating the historical genealogies of discursive production and the relations between power and knowledge constitute the theoretical foundations for

understanding the social and cultural relevance of discourses. Foucault (1972) suggests that language is both constituted by and constitutive of the social world. On the one hand, discursive formations are historically contingent upon specific social situations and contexts. Foucault firmly rejects any notion of absolute truth or universal reality. For him, our representation, understanding and theorization of the world are never detached from the grids of social relations and power. Thus Foucault contends that things are “true” only in specific historical contexts (Hall, 2001; Flyvbjerg, 1998). On the other hand, Foucauldian theories also highlight the constitutive and productive power of discourses and languages. It is argued that the production of discourses can strengthen certain claims of “truth”. Social subjects are constituted when dominant claims of truths and knowledge are internalized and turned into normalized and widely accepted understandings of the social world. In other words, discourses organize the ways in which social subjects act and make sense of social phenomena. To understand the constitutive power of languages, the notions of subject and subjectivity need a fundamental re-conceptualization (Hall, 2001; Fairclough, 1992). Traditional linguistic theories conceive of the human subject merely as the producer of the representations of the real world. But as Foucault (1980) argues, the human subject is also constructed and produced by dominant discourses and knowledge. Or in Stuart Hall’s (2001, p. 79) words, “this subject of discourse cannot be outside discourse, because it must be subjected to discourse” and “submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge”. Finally, for Foucault (1980; 1998) power is not a possession which rests in the hands of fixed social groups or naturally associated with certain bounded social identities. Instead, power arises out of privileged positions to *speak* and to *represent*. Through producing the dominant knowledge about what is legitimate and appropriate in everyday social life (Foucault 1978), discourse may also serve as a crucial means of social control in historically contingent constellations of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1977; 1980; Davies and Harré, 2001; Carabine, 2001; Fairclough, 1992; 1995; 2001).

In this research I see languages and discourses as social products invested with rich meanings, ideologies, and social power, instead of passive signifiers of unmediated, absolute realities. As Kress (2001) points out, linguistic behaviours are associated quite closely with certain aspects of social organization and social life. Drawing on critical linguistic theories, Kress (2001) argues that the choices we make in the production of particular utterances all arise out of social conditions which are also embedded in particular fields of power. Edley (2001) also notes that we have to re-situate discursive practices into the historical contexts in which languages are produced; and the relatively coherent common sense is more “interpretive repertoire” (p. 198) than taken-for-granted truth. Therefore numerous authors

have investigated how the production of discourses is related to concrete ideological regimes under specific historical conditions. On the other hand, as Fairclough (1995) has pointed out, the ideological coherence of discourse has the potential to make certain meanings look natural and to “conflate all the ‘taken-for-granted’ under the rubric of knowledge” (p. 31; also Parker, 2000). Thus the collective recognition of our social world, as Billig (2001) contends, is actually socially mediated and constructed. When we talk about things, we tend to use the terms and representations which are culturally, historically and ideologically available. For this reason, the construction of ideological regimes and dominant knowledge can also contribute to the hierarchical relations of social control, dominance and subordination.

In this thesis I mainly applied the techniques which Fairclough (1992; 1995; 2001; 2003) proposed for doing critical discourse analysis. These techniques follow the Foucauldian legacy of attending to the relationships between knowledge production and power. Also, they are featured by a theoretical commitment to the Althusserian conception of ideology and the Gramscian theory of hegemony. Moreover, I concurred with Rose (2001) and Fairclough (1992; 2003) that analysis of language should combine textual meanings (which Rose terms *discourse analysis I*) and the social dynamics and power structures which produced, and were also produced by, meanings and knowledge (what Rose terms *discourse analysis II*). I have also adopted what Fairclough (2003, p. 14) advocates as the “realist position” in discourse analysis which emphasizes that our languages are expected to represent the real world even though the knowledge produced is always contingent, shifting and partial.

My approach towards discourses takes into account a large spectrum of textual meanings, narratives of social positions and identities, and representation of social events and processes. As Fairclough (2003) argues, there is a dialectics between discursive meanings and social structures. Discourses may be the literal reflections of constructed truths and knowledge, but they also hold the potentials to incubate and construct new subject positions, identities and social relations. Moreover, my analyses are interested in the role which discourse plays in *naturalizing* ideological regimes and consolidating dominant power relations. Ideological discursive formation may create certain representations which “may come to appear as merely a transparent reflection of some ‘reality’ which is given in the same way to all”; and discursive formation also “produces subjects which appear not to have been ‘subjected’ or produced, but to be free, homogenous and responsible for (their) actions” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 44).

Overall, analyses in my research were interested in the ways in which discourses construct the “realities” and “truths” of our social world and how these constructed knowledge contributed to the reconstitution of power and social relations. In particular, I also examined the moments of *silence* in dominant social discourses and analyzed how what was *unsaid* was related to the foreclosing of alternative representations and interpretations. I bore in mind the analytical framework proposed by Czarniawska (2004: 97) to help me effectively deconstruct the discourses in question. This framework included these steps below:

- I. Dismantling dichotomy, exposing it as a false distinction.
- II. Examining silences – what is not said in the dominant representations.
- III. Attending to disruptions and contradictions – places where a text or an argument fails to make sense or does not constitute.
- IV. Focusing on the element that is most alien or peculiar in the text – to find the limits of what is conceivable or permissible.
- V. Interpreting metaphors as a rich source of multiple meanings.
- VI. Analyzing double entendres that may point to an unconscious subtext.
- VII. Separating group-specific and more general sources of bias by ‘reconstructing’ the text with substitution of its main elements.

***Non-participant observation:*** The third major method which has informed my research in this thesis is non-participant observation. I name the method which I have used as non-participant since in normal cases I was not involved personally in the social life and social processes which I tried to understand, although I did reveal my researcher identity to the people whom I observed and with whom I often established relationships of friendship. Certainly all forms of observation involve some extent of participation – even the passive relationship between social actors and spectators may incubate sociologically relevant meanings. During my research I acted most often as a “legitimate peripheral participant” (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Observation in this thesis was employed more as a supplementary method to qualitative interviews, but very often it did generate findings and insights which textual and discursive data could not sufficiently account for.

Observation is arguably one of the easiest ways for collecting firsthand data from the field. It aims at getting close and direct sense of natural settings which are not subject to strictly controlled research design or experiment. As a technique of data collection, the observation method supposes that mundane behaviours are meaningful and purposeful, reflecting deeper values and beliefs (McKechnie, 2008). By entering personally the social setting which is

central to a particular research project, the researcher is closely caught up in the webs of social relations, social interactions and cultural effects which he/she attempts to examine (Hughes, 2002). As Emerson (1981) once argued, the observation method is used to fathom the subjective, situated and constructed social meanings. Its purpose is to come to terms with social actors' own perspectives and report social realities in those actors' own terms.

Mason (2002) has proposed a number of rationales for adopting observation as a formal research method. First, it assumes that situated interactions, actions and behaviours, as well as the ways in which people interpret them, are central to research questions rather than trivial and insignificant. Second, it is also based on the epistemological position that observational data generate new knowledge and evidence which cannot be extracted simply from interviews and documents. Third, the observation method also coincides with the view that some social analyses and explanations require situationally or naturally occurring, and in-depth data. Analysis of observational materials is articulated with analyses of broader patterns and social contexts, but it also produces extra insights and conclusions. Finally, observations enable the researcher to be more active and reflective in the research process.

There are a number of technical issues which the researcher needs to take seriously in actually undertaking observations. First, the observer must adopt a social role in relation to the people to be observed (Gold, 1958; Baker, 2006). Most introductory texts on observation have focused almost exclusively on participant observation which enables deeper engagements with the researched. However, in my research I mainly situated myself as a non-participating observer or in some cases a marginal participant in the social life or activities I observed. I decided to adopt such roles because my own identity – young, well-educated, from a middle class background and culturally “mainstream” – seemed to depart from the social groups I intended to research, though to different extents. For example, with regard to the social life I have documented in Chapters 3 and 5, I had no previous experience for participating in collective social and cultural activities in public spaces. From the perspective of those I researched I was not necessarily a desirable candidate to be a new participant, either. To force access into these groups might create considerable difficulties for my interactions with them and bring unnecessary embarrassment to the relationships between the researcher and the researched. But my withdrawal from direct participation did not mean I conducted my research in a covert way. On the contrary, after some preliminary observational work I always conducted interviews with the groups I was looking at, disclosed my researcher identity and established personal friendships with them. I chatted with them frequently and also commented on their social life and collective activities. Was the openness of my purpose potentially harmful to the desired unobtrusiveness in the

research setting? My experiences suggested that the influence seemed to be minor. Since most social activities and social life examined in my research were subject to constant gaze of outsiders anyway, an additional onlooker was not likely to reshape profoundly their routines of social life and activities. On the other hand, as Berg (2001) has suggested, personalized relationships with the researched can even add to the *invisibility* of the researcher. During my research, disclosure of my purpose and the establishment of personalized relations with these groups fundamentally reduced their alertness towards me. As a result, my appearance as an onlooker with a camera and a notebook at hands was not interpreted as bizarre or discomforting. In sum, during my observational work I occupied a liminal space between the social role of an active participant and that of a totally detached stranger. Very often I acted as a pure observer, but at the same time I was not anonymous or remote, either.

The observational work I conducted was unstructured. It was not framed in any pre-established schedules. Written records of collected observational data are descriptive and in the form of narrative-based account (Robson, 2002). I started my observation without carrying into the field any predetermined categories or rigid theoretical frameworks, though I bore in mind the extant literature and some general research questions (McKechnie, 2008). Similar to interviews conducted in this research, observation work was undertaken in accordance to the grounded theory approach. Accordingly, analyses of observational data were carried out in a bottom-up and open-ended way (Emerson, 1981). Each time after collecting data from the field, a preliminary analysis would be conducted. In doing so, I managed to gradually narrow down the focuses of observation and identify more in-depth research questions. As Adler and Adler (1994) have argued, at the initial stage of observation research data collected are necessarily descriptive and unfocused. As the research process goes on, data should be progressively more focused and articulated with potential theoretical frameworks until observation data reach a state of theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Therefore each observation project has phases and activities which give rise to a funnel structure in which the research becomes more and more focused during its course (Punch, 2005; Walsh, 2004).

I used a camera (with video recording capacity) and field notes to record observational data in this research. Photographing and video-recording were used to produce visually concrete and more panoramic records of the social life and activities to be examined. A huge amount of time was spent in order to obtain thick observations of multiple occasions (Yin, 2011). Following the recommendations put forward by Emerson (1981), Mason (2002), Baker (2006) and McKechnie (2008), I have included in my field notes three types of

information. First, there is background information about the where and when of my observational work as well as general characteristics of the material and social settings in which my observation was undertaken. Second and most importantly, the field notes contain detailed records and descriptions of the social activities and processes at question in my research. Finally, accounts of what have been observed are accompanied by the random thoughts, reflections, questions and even confusions which arose out of the fieldwork.

The interpretation and analysis of data collected from observation were similar to those of interview data. I treated my field notes as a particular type of transcripts and coded them in the same way as I coded the interview data. Field notes were also supplemented by video clips taken from the field. Since my research did not follow an ethnomethodological approach I did not undertake a “video analysis” in a strict sense. Some videos which were not fully reflected in the field notes already written up were translated into new narrative-based accounts which then underwent new rounds of coding and interpreting.

### **Fieldwork experiences**

*Chapter 3:* To collect qualitative data for the case study in Chapter 3 was a relatively easy experience. It was easy not in terms of the time and energy which were spent in this process, but in terms of the ways of social interactions between the researcher and the researched. In many aspects, the people researched in Chapter 3 shared much in common with me. They lived in the same city as I did, and some of them might be my next-door neighbours (it is actually true for my fieldwork). They shared similar perspectives and trajectories of life with me; and some of them might be friends of my parents or parents of my friends (it is true again!). Their stories and experiences of everyday leisure and cultural activities were already recounted from time to time around me in my own everyday life. They were not social or political elites; and neither were they too poor to have shared life experiences and everyday vocabularies with the researcher. Some of them were rural migrants whose social and cultural identities were radically distinct from my own. But as I had previously done a number of studies with rural migrants in Guangzhou, I did not feel any substantial cultural distance from them. From the part of rural migrants, my general impression indicated that if the researcher treated them with respect and sometimes a bit of friendship, they were usually happy to interact with the researcher for sharing their experiences, feelings and points of view.

The “easiness” of fieldwork had actually created a notable challenge for this particular case study since I needed to excavate certain extraordinary social and cultural potentials from the collective leisure and cultural activities undertaken by those people who seemed to

be so ordinary and so familiar. To embark on such a project, I needed first to select my fieldwork sites. At last I decided to focus on two urban spaces of public leisure and cultural activities, namely the People's Park and the North Gate Square. I made this decision due to the recommendations from local intellectuals and long-term residents in Guangzhou, but also out of analytical and practical concerns. First of all, both sites were viewed as ideal locales of study because of the immense diversity of activities taking place in them. Due to the popularity of these two sites amongst local inhabitants and the cultural ambience accumulated over a long period of time, both the Park and the Square now are home to a surprising variety of activities and spontaneously organized groups. For most of the local acquaintances who I consulted, the two sites were taken for granted as the most renowned spaces of everyday leisure in Guangzhou. Second, these two sites were rendered favourable due to ordinary urban inhabitants' active participation. The cultural atmosphere which was accumulated during the last one or two decades created a cultural *habitus* which in turn encouraged participation and interaction. Third, both of the two sites were conveniently connected with other parts of the city via public transport. The North Gate Square was also affiliated to Sun Yat-sen University where I did my Bachelors study. As a former student in this university, I already had accumulated relatively rich background knowledge about the social life going on there.

My next task was to decide the types of collective activities which I needed to place my focus upon. Collective cultural and leisure activities in People's Park and the North Gate Square were certainly more diverse than what I have examined in Chapter 3. To narrow down the analytical scope of this case study, I did some pilot observation and interviews in these two sites and at last I devised two sets of criteria with which I could select activities which were of the greatest interest to my research. First, I decided not to focus on those activities which had been extensively examined in the West and did not unfold in particularly different ways in China. Thus young people's street-dance and skateboarding were not studied in detailed ways in my chapter. This rationale certainly ran the risk of exoticism, but at the same time I would like to concentrate my energy on those experiences which not only seemed to be unique to the post-reform China but could potentially provide new insights to the research of public space. Second, I decided to focus on those group activities which demonstrated a notable *performative* dimension and involved the ongoing and shifting displays of cultural meanings. To actually identify these activities was a fairly subjective experience. As many qualitative researchers have already realized, fieldwork involves the researcher's continuous emotional interactions with the social and cultural realities occurring naturally in socio-spatial settings. During my efforts to identify potential



group activities which were appropriate for detailed examinations, I always – consciously and unconsciously – paid more attention to these social events that evoked my own emotional echoes and responses.

To actually conduct the substantive fieldwork of this case study was a relatively straightforward process. Since more established participants in these group activities would not consider me as someone who shared with them similar cultural tastes and experiences, my social role during the fieldwork was in most time that of an accepted observer. Normally I would do some initial observation of a group activity first, then conduct some interviews with participants in the group (partly to disclose my researcher identity and establish personalized connections with the group), and finally go back to observation. Access to those groups was achieved in relatively easy ways. Almost all the participants in those group activities were happy, or even eager, to talk to someone who was willing to listen to their experiences of collective social life. This readiness to talk, I think, also mirrored how important these collective activities were to these participants' construction of cultural identifications. In fact, my interviews with these ordinary people participating in collective social life can also be seen as processes in which they actively *performed* the cultural identities which I examined in Chapter 3. The dancing teachers, the ordinary dancers, the amateur performers, the rural migrants and even middle-class *kung fu* practitioners were keen to frame cultural meanings and identities into discursive configurations and languages. The accounts which they offered were by no means taken-for-granted "realities", but rather mediated by complex intentions, desires and cultural experiences. My general impression from this case study is that if the researcher is willing to listen, people who participate in social and spatial practices in these public sites would be motivated to construct accounts and discourses to render intelligible and narratable their intimate social and cultural engagements.

As I have suggested earlier, interpretations of qualitative data collected from actual social settings are always mediated by the researcher's own identity positions and understandings of the social world. In this research, my identity position is a university-based researcher who, due to my age and trajectories of socialization, is not particularly familiar with collective social and cultural activities in public space. To reduce the potential biases in interpreting and analyzing the data, I used informal interview, formal in-depth interview and observation to triangulate my findings. I also relied on extended observation and intensive interviews to thicken my findings and understandings. Within the amount of time which I could spend on this case study I tried to interview as many people as I could. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes to one hour. But if my respondents would like to spend longer time

to recount their experiences and feelings, I was always willing to extend the duration of interviews. I also tried to enrich observational data by conducting observation in multiple occasions, with various groups for each type of collective activity and at different times in a day including early morning, afternoon and night.

Because of my own cultural distance from and unfamiliarity with the public social life in question, I adopted a funnel structure of research in accordance to an inductive approach. This approach helped me to gradually narrow the focuses of my research and refine my research questions. More importantly, it also allowed me to from time to time correct my previous interpretations of empirical data. For example, at the initial stage of this case study, I developed a personal antipathy towards those dancing teachers who placed their classrooms in the public. I understood the public teaching merely in terms of personal vanity and an eagerness to show off. This interpretation was certainly embedded in my own entrenched subject position that teaching and dancing performance should take place in culturally appropriate venues and only those who did the best in the formal institution of cultural consumption could present performances to a public audience. This biased interpretation was challenged since further data collected suggested that it was more likely that the teachers and the students had observed their respective social roles, established temporary social relations and constructed cultural meanings circulated within those improvised social collectives. It was through the recursive processes of data collection and data interpretation that I came to terms with the complex social identities and cultural meanings at work in the construction of these two sites of study.

**Chapter 4:** Studying gay cruisers in People's Park was probably the most challenging project during my entire PhD research. As a heterosexual, university-based researcher who was previously so distant from the local gay community in Guangzhou, I was certainly not an ideal candidate for conducting a research about gay men's use of public space. In the Western academia, many people are still holding onto the (probably clichéd) idea that gay men research gay men, the black research the black, women research women, and the rest of all scholars research everything that is left. Certainly, this academic convention is quickly collapsing due to the fact that it potentially reproduces the hegemony of dominant or mainstream social identities. I decided to embark on this case study not only because the relationship between sexuality and public space was a fairly important research terrain in the studies of public space, but also due to my conviction that discussions of homosexuality in China should not be confined within a bounded LGBTQ community. It was my assumption that dialogues and interactions between the gay community in Guangzhou and their

“outsiders” could contribute to a more inclusive and socially powerful basis for future projects of emancipation. The epistemological stance which I discussed earlier also enabled me to believe that interactive research processes could destabilize the boundaries of pre-established positions and cultural identities.

I got contact with Chi-Heng Foundation, a Guangzhou-based NGO of homosexual issues, in July 2012. People there kindly agreed to arrange a meeting with me when I came for fieldwork. In mid-August I arrived in Guangzhou and made a visit to the office of Chi-Heng at once. My first face-to-face engagement with the staff in this foundation, I have to admit, was a fairly awkward experience. Since all the staff there were self-identified gay men, there was a slightly defensive and fortress-like mentality in their workplace culture. Mr Ye, Director of this small NGO, offered me an informal interview during this first visit. Obviously, he treated me as someone from the straight world who fantasized to peep into the “exotic” territories of homosexual cultures. Throughout his talk with me he kept doing some other businesses on computer, so I needed to suspend the conversation from time to time in order to accommodate the other matters he had at hand. As the leader of a well-known local NGO, by no means should he be unaware of the basic etiquettes in inter-personal interactions. Thus his “impoliteness”, I assume, was a clear signal that he was not taking seriously my intended research. What is even worse, many of the things which I was interested in seemed to be banal and taken-for-granted elements in gay men’s everyday life, and hence I was mocked, though implicitly, from time to time for being so ignorant about “basic gay things”. As a result, the talk ended up as a quite embarrassing and disheartening experience. I was certainly partly responsible for this unhappy first encounter, since I was guilty of not having prepared myself with sufficient background knowledge about the gay community in China. Fortunately, Mr Ye still agreed to lend me support in my research and allowed me to join their team as a HIV-AIDS prevention volunteer. His attitude towards my identity position, therefore, seemed to be at best ambivalent – while he was not convinced that I was capable enough to study the public gay culture in People’s Park, he obviously hoped for some input from a trained academic who was willing to work together with them.

I entered the field with other HIV-AIDS volunteers who were all gay men themselves. However, since most of these volunteers were college students who shared many everyday experiences and vocabularies with me, the cultural distance between them and me seemed to be shortened. These volunteers provided invaluable help at the initial stage of this research as they introduced me to the gay cruisers in People’s Park and convinced them that I was a “friend” rather than an imprudent intruder. Volunteer work in People’s Park was in the form of distributing condoms and giving tips for safe sex. Working as a HIV-AIDS volunteer

enabled me to establish some personal connections with gay cruisers in the park as the work involved numerous opportunities to talk extensively with them. Also, by working as a volunteer I adopted a social position as a peripheral participant in the ongoing social production of the cruising site. Yet, I need to acknowledge that the extent to which I could participate was fairly limited: the only ways in which I could interact with the gay cruisers was to observe what was visible more publicly and talk with gay men. I was not able, however, to participate in those activities which were conditioned by more subtle and implicit sexual vernaculars.

Although I immediately disclosed my heterosexual identity and my role as a university-based researcher, my good relationship with other volunteers and my volunteer work allowed me to occupy a somewhat liminal social role in the cruising site: although I was not a purely insider, neither was I automatically treated as a threatening outsider who was expected to discriminate and potentially conflict with gay men in the park. This social position provided me a relatively favourable starting point to conduct my research. During the first two weeks of this research, I spent a lot of time in the cruising site without any pre-established research questions and did some preparatory work for further study. First, I did some preliminary observations to develop a closer impression of the homo-normative social life in this space. Second, I conducted some informal interviews with a number of gay men to gain useful background knowledge about the history and recent development of the cruising space. Third, I also used the chances of volunteer work to establish personalized social connections with some key figures in the gay community.

After this initial stage I crafted some research questions and started formal interviews with gay men in the park. All the interviews were done in the cruising site due to the consideration that the cultural ambience in the park might help the interviewees to relax, thus facilitating the rapport between the researcher and the researched. Fortunately, most of the gay cruisers seemed to be quite willing to talk and it was never difficult for me to find an informative interviewee. The reason underlying this, I assume, was that extensive and oppressive experiences of the closet motivated these gay cruisers to seize the chances to speak their own voices. Due to my intrinsic social identity as a heterosexual outsider, an important challenge which I faced was to ensure that my interviewees did not deliberately distort their accounts to please me and accommodate my social and cultural positions. Especially given that many of my interviewees emphasized the notion of self-discipline, I had to automatically suspect that they were constructing culturally more “acceptable” images of gayness which did not really reflect their grounded experiences of everyday life. Thus I used some techniques to reduce the potential distortion in interview data. First, my identity

as a HIV-AIDS volunteer affiliated to a well-known local NGO of homosexual issues helped me to build up a more sincere relationship with my interviewees. Second, I always expressed to the interviewees my supportive stance towards gay rights movement and gay liberation so that the cultural distance between me and the interviewees could be at least partly overcome. Third, my interview involved telling the interviewees about the knowledge, ideas and views that I had about their social life in the public space. The sharing of information demonstrated some expertise knowledge which I already had and helped to build mutual trust. Finally, I also tried to triangulate my findings from the interview with my observations of the social and verbal interactions between gay cruisers.

My relation with Chi-Heng foundation was also a continuously evolving social process. My good relationship with other volunteers secured a more consolidated place for me in this organization. Thus staff in Chi-Heng helped me to approach a number of leaders of local NGOs specializing in homosexuality issues. I also began to participate in a number of social events and activities organized by it. For example, I gave a brief talk about my initial findings in People's Park which obviously impressed some activists from the local gay community. I helped in a series of international seminars organized by Chi-Heng and acted as an English interpreter. Besides, I established personal friendship with many volunteers in Chi-Heng. These relationships of friendship were built up not for pragmatic or utilitarian concerns, but they nonetheless facilitated my research in the field. Many volunteers from Chi-Heng also acted as intermediaries during my interviews with gay cruisers in the park. Their input not only helped to build up good relationships and mutual trust between me and the cruisers, but also provided many new directions of inquiry and encouraged new accounts and narratives constructed by the interviewees.

***Chapter 5:*** I got to know the singing of red songs in Guangzhou because of the advice from a local-based academic. He suggested that in the collective singing of red songs the cultural meanings conveyed by everyday leisure seemed to extend beyond individual happiness and contain some wider social and political connotations. With pure curiosity, I made my first visit to the site of red song singing in Baiyun Mountain Park. This first encounter with the pro-socialist cultural atmosphere in a public social space made me not only impressed, but thoroughly astonished. As a young student who never experienced the Maoist era, it had been my taken-for-granted assumption that everyone in contemporary China was comfortable with the economic reform and the new market economy while no one should cherish the memories of the Maoist time. Although my academic training had enabled me to align with an anti-capitalist political stance, it was certainly not my wish that China go back

to the political extremism and the ideologically totalitarian regime under Mao. Yet, my taken-for-granted understanding of post-reform China was somewhat questioned as the singing of red songs clearly indicated that Maoist ideologies still held some purchase amongst particular groups of Chinese people.

Thus I embarked on a search on the Internet for further information about the collective singing of red songs in Guangzhou. To my surprise, the public display of red songs had obviously become a well-known public culture. Media reports of collective singing of red songs in Guangzhou's urban parks had abounded. While most online reports and articles portrayed the singing of red songs as a manifestation of ordinary people's support for the current state regime, some others already touched upon the ideas of political nostalgia and cultural discontinuity. Thus I decided to place a special focus on this particular story in my research of public leisure and cultural activities. After an extensive online research, I chose four urban sites whose public events of red song singing were most frequently spotlighted in the local media, namely Baiyun Mountain Park, Yuexiu Park, Tianhe Park and Liuhuahu Park.

After deciding the four sites of this case study, I began to conduct a pilot research. The purpose of my pilot research was twofold. First, I collected background information about the collective singing of red songs, including how these activities were organized, who was in charge of organizing them, how the time schedules were arranged and how one could participate in these activities. Second, I also conducted preliminary observation work to build some first impressions of the socialist cultural ambience in these sites of singing. I disclosed my researcher identity to the core figures who organized these singing events, but during this stage of research my social role was more a peripheral observer who rarely intervened directly into these activities. After two weeks' pilot study I started the formal part of the fieldwork. Similar to my research presented in Chapter 3, I adopted a funnel structure of research to gradually specify and refine my research questions. The entire fieldwork experience was also similar to that of the case study in Chapter 3 which I have already discussed.

Yet, the groups of red song singers were distinct from groups which undertook other types of collective activities. In many aspects core participants in each singing group seemed to form a more cohesive and consolidated social community. Were the ways of social interaction in these groups related to their unique political visions and pro-socialist nostalgia? This question elicited my curiosity about the socialities in these groups outside the immediate social settings of red song singing. Fortunately, after a number of interviews with core participants in these groups I managed to establish some personal friendships with them

and they, on the other hand, seemed to like a young university student who was interested in their political and social identities. Thus I was lucky enough to be invited to some parties which they organized in some participants' homes. In these parties, these red song singers cooked together, ate together, watched TV together and chatted with each other. Some videotapes recording red song singing and other social events were also displayed on the TV sets. Fond memories of the past were revisited while new collective experiences were created. Financial resources which supported these happily anticipated parties were from all the participants, but no one cared about the exact amount of money each participant offered. All these red song singers cherished the "authentic interpersonal relations" which one could experience in such social occasions. Many red song singers suggested that these parties allowed them to savour again the collectivism under Mao which was not contaminated by the logics of commodity relations and capitalism. Certainly, my experiences of these parties could not be translated directly into usable research data. Nonetheless, they enabled me to come to terms more closely with the political and cultural identities which I examined in Chapter 5.

The research presented in Chapter 5 also involved my difficult engagement with the far-left activists which I got to know at Tianhe Park. Their politics certainly interested me as it was very well articulated with the socialist ambience in the singing of red songs. A difficult question which I needed to engage with, however, was what social distance I should keep when interacting with these activists. The reason for this question was simple: I did not agree with the political views and political visions which these activists had expressed. For me, the Maoist regime was no less hegemonic than capitalist economic relations. Thus these activists' aspiration to restore the Maoist political economy made me feel rather uneasy. Yet, my social and political position in relation to these activists was at best ambiguous. I certainly stood for the establishment of a welfare state in China. My problem with the activists, on the other hand, was that I did not concur that a welfare state could only be built by a charismatic leader or an omnipotent state regime. To build up rapport and know better these activists' resistant politics, I decided to use our shared hope for a welfare state as the platform on which some dialogues could at least be initiated. I expressed my personal alignment with Marxist and Leftist theories in the West so that these activists were at least willing to talk with me. During my interviews with the activists I often deliberately disclosed my criticisms of Stalinism and Maoism, although I paid special attention to the wording and phrasing used to frame my viewpoints. In particular, I would like to relate my own understandings of Maoism to the broader issues such as grassroots empowerment, democracy and rights. Interestingly, rather than provoking these activists' anger and

criticisms, my remarks often invited them to construct discourses about how the notions of democracy and right were understood in their own terms and vocabularies. In many cases I felt that I was treated as an innocent student who had unluckily been brainwashed by “Western” and “bourgeoisie” thinking. The activists, on the other hand, were eager to preach me orthodox Maoist political ideas and worldviews. Although at last I was not convinced by them, this unique interactive relation between me and my interviewees enabled me to get some access to the rich discursive world which these activists dwelled in.

**Chapter 6:** I became interested in motorcycle taxis because during my fieldwork I personally benefited a lot from this special form of transport service. It helped me to travel promptly from metro stations to my residence, my office in Sun Yat-sen University, to some government departments and most importantly to my fieldwork sites. Like other passengers I was clearly aware that I was using an “illegal” form of urban transport. Yet, as an inhabitant of a city with 12 million people I generally concurred with motorcycle taxi drivers’ own argument that motorcycle taxis played a positive role in helping people who did not own a private car to strengthen their socio-spatial connections with places and people. The urban migrants who operated motorcycle taxis were also unique as they were not subsumed in China’s fast expanding manufacturing sector which exploited migrants’ labour in socially and culturally alienating workplaces. Instead, they inserted their labour power into the everyday life of urban people to achieve greater control of their economic productivity and also better incomes. In the meantime, however, the streets were also the arena in which their social and cultural marginality was extensively experienced. Even during my own use of motorcycle taxis, there were several times when the motorcycle drivers needed to manage more complex and more hidden routes to dodge police surveillance. Each time this made motorcycle mobility a mentally uncomfortable and disturbing experience even for me as a passenger.

My own experiences of motorcycle taxi mobility gave rise to three questions in which I was interested. First, why were these migrants enrolled into this business and how important was it to their economic survival in the city? Second, how were motorcycle taxis and their drivers positioned as the collective “others” to the urban society in Guangzhou and the local state power? Third, in what social situations and structures of power are these motorcycle taxis situated on a daily basis?

With these questions in mind, I entered the streets of Guangzhou to conduct fieldwork with motorcycle taxi drivers. I identified two relatively peripheral urban districts, namely Tianhe District and Haizhu District, as the spatial settings of my research. Due to less



sophisticated public transport service, in these two districts motorcycle taxis persisted tenaciously and even flourished in recent years despite stern police regulation. I travelled alongside major metro lines for encountering potential motorcycle taxi drivers for observation or interviews. At the initial stage of the research, I travelled with motorcycle taxis many times in order to obtain some background knowledge related to this urban transport. I was interested in the time during which migrants actually dared to operate this business, the geographical areas within which this business could be conducted, the ways in which motorcycle taxi drivers managed the time-spaces of their mobility to evade police officers, and the usual distance which a safe journey allowed. Certainly, this process also involved many informal talks with the motorcycle drivers in my role as a passenger. This pilot study, which lasted about two weeks, was probably the most participatory part in my entire PhD research. Although the information which a passenger could grasp was limited in scope and depth, this process enabled me to develop a broad understanding of motorcycle taxis and the livelihood of their operators.

The next step involved interviews with motorcycle taxi drivers and also non-participant observation in major “concentration points” of motorcycle taxis to see how police bashing actually took place. Access to motorcycle taxi drivers was not difficult since many of them hoped that my work could bring their voices to a wider public<sup>20</sup>. But sometimes motorcycle taxi drivers were also cautious about my identity since they suspected that I was actually a journalist who was going to produce stigmatizing accounts of motorcycle taxis in local media. Thus formal documents confirming my student status in Edinburgh and my affiliation to South China Normal University and Sun Yat-sen University as a Research Assistant were useful from time to time. I also did a lot of observation work in major urban arteries where motorcycle taxis were frequently seen to document the ways in which street-level police power collided with motorcycle mobility.

I paid all the motorcycle taxi drivers who were willing to be interviewed. The funding which made these payments possible was from the Centre for Cultural Industry and Cultural Geography, South China Normal University. Each interviewee was paid 30 to 50 Chinese RMB which was not a big amount. It was a hard decision to involve what was similar to an economic transaction in my research process. To reward the interviewees with cash money

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<sup>20</sup> It is certainly my own aspiration that my research project can help in some way to ameliorate the situation of these motorcycle taxi drivers. I am intending to undertake two measures. First, I will try to publish research articles in Chinese language and in Chinese journals. It is expected, of course, that I will experience some uneasy encounters with the institution of censorship. Yet the academic landscape in China is complicated and certainly not wholly hijacked by the state power. Some journals are more liberal-minded and welcome articles with a critical stance. Second, if possible, I will prepare some (non-academic) reports which summarize motorcycle taxi drivers’ situations and their understandings of street order and safety. I will try to submit these accounts to some local media.

ran the risk of reproducing the already uneven power relation between the researcher and the researched, as it felt like that research data were “bought” via the researcher’s possession of economic capital. Besides, some interviewees might be “lured” to talk while they were not necessarily willing to be involved in the research. However, I would have felt a strong sense of guilt if I had not paid the interviewees. The reason was comprehensible: the interview was a time-consuming process and during this period the interviewee might have been able to serve some passengers and make some income. Since these motorcycle taxi drivers were already socially and economically marginal, I certainly did not want to see that their willingness to help with my research would sabotage their economic opportunities. Thus I decided to economically compensate my interviewees. To avoid the ethical problems mentioned above and to ensure that each interviewee was genuinely willing to participate in my research, I usually told the interviewees about the cash payment only after the interview was completed. If I needed to inform potential interviewees about the payment prior to the interview, I did so only when I was sure that they were sincerely willing to participate but felt reluctant only due to the cost of time.

The other important body of data in this case study was the articles and editorials in major local newspapers. I chose three local newspapers as the sources of media-based discursive data, namely *Yangcheng Evening News*, *Nanfang Daily* and *Guangzhou Daily*. All the three newspapers are run by state enterprises and under direct state control and sponsorship. Also, they often acted as the spokesmen of the state by circulating dominant ideas and views. I chose the period from 2002 to 2006 because it was right before the official outlawing of motorcycles in 2007 and during this time the motorcycle was a hotly debated issue frequently headlined in local media. Since most of the newspaper issues that I needed to review were not yet digitalized and posted online, I accessed the printed versions of the three newspapers in Sun Yat-sen University Library. Due to the huge amount of newspaper issues to be gone through, I sought help from colleagues in Sun Yat-sen University who posted calls for students who were willing to help. In total 8 students were recruited. Each of them used a digital camera to photograph whatever piece related to motorcycles which he/she encountered in a newspaper. All these helping students were paid according to the numbers of newspaper issues which they reviewed. In this way, I was able to build up a database which was almost exhaustive of motorcycle-related discursive data in these three newspapers spanning a period of five years.

Finally, this case study came to its most difficult stage – contacting local government offices which were responsible for the outlawing and regulation of motorcycle taxis including the local Transportation Administration Department and the Police Department.

Government offices and departments in China are notorious for their fortress-like style and lack of public transparency. Decision-making within the state bureaucracy is a highly clandestine process and very limited information is allowed to be disclosed to the general public. I encountered the same problem during my fieldwork. From an unofficial channel, I got to know that the regulation of motorcycle taxis was considered a “sensitive issue” by the municipal government since information about it could be used to criticize the local state. Thus I decided to conceal my identity as a postgraduate student from Edinburgh due to the consideration that my affiliation to a foreign institution would utterly disqualify my access to the local state. I used introductory letters issued by Sun Yat-sen University and South China Normal University to negotiate access to government departments and also requested for interviews with government officials. The gatekeepers which I interacted with were the “propaganda offices” in different government departments. Yet, these attempts made no difference. All my requests were denied formally by these government organs and the reasons were all the same: “the issue which you wish to talk about is not an appropriate one”.

Having failed to gain formal contacts with those in the local state, I decided to collect data from the government side through three alternative methods. First and most straightforwardly, I collected already publicized government documents from online and from the Administrative Service Centre of Guangzhou Municipal Government in which some old government documents were archived. Second, I requested disclosure of government documents and information via the official channel of the online Request for Government Information. This online channel was endorsed by the local state of Guangzhou in order to build limited (and also controlled) dialogues between the state and the society. Once an online application form was submitted, the government department was legally liable to issue a Response which included requested information. I used this channel three times with the local Police Department, which resulted in three *Responses to the Request of Government Information*. Information included in these documents, of course, was carefully constructed and censored. Nonetheless, the three documents which I received from the local government were fairly detailed and informative. They helped me a lot when I tried to group discursive data into empirically and theoretically grounded themes and categories. Third, I mobilized all the social networks I could use to gain “informal” access to people inside the local state apparatus. In the cultural context of China personal connections and personal friendships are often the most important reasons for people to answer others’ requests. For example, one professor in Sun Yat-sen University introduced me to his friend Dr. T who was a high rank planning official in the local Transport Administration Department. The latter then agreed to have an interview with me. In a similar way, I gained access to some officers

in the local police department via a colleague in South China Normal University. These newly acquainted informants then became the new nodal points in my social network and through them I could gain access to other interviewees with a snowball technique.

The limitations of accessing people in the local state apparatus through an “informal” approach are apparent. Since access is negotiated exclusively within a byzantine network of personal relations and connections, this process is deeply embedded in immediate social situations and thus highly indeterminate. Since every social network – however sophisticated it is – has its limits, many key figures in the decision-making process could not be included in my research. Even for those who seemed to be reachable in this network there was no guarantee that they would be willing to participate in my research since every decision was made as the outcome of complex and unpredictable social interactions. However, this informality also resulted in some unexpected advantages for my research. Since interviewees were not accessed through official channels, the social ambience during the interviews was therefore relaxed. Also, because the discursive materials generated in these “informal” social settings were not considered representative of the state, the interviewees did not simply reproduce standard state discourses. On the contrary, the accounts which they offered were often penetrated by highly personalized rhetoric and narratives. This was particularly true in my interviews with police officers who were very active in expressing their own ideas and views on street order and street security. The narratives produced by them were often articulated at the level of the personal. This not only allowed me to see how dominant state discourses had been internalized into these police officers’ construction of personal and collective cultural identities, but also encouraged me to view police officers at the street level as social actors with concrete subject positions rather than simply the agents of a somewhat abstract “state”.

## **Appendix II The consent form**

I need to admit frankly that during my entire fieldwork the paper-based consent form was not very often used in a serious manner. During my fieldwork, the formally styled, paper-based consent form was often associated with official state bureaucracy and considered “too formal”. Thus it often evoked an unnecessary feeling of caution and nervousness. Also, in China most interviewees tend to keep their true names a secret and thus are reluctant to give a formal signature on the form. Hence in many cases I had to avoid using a formal paper document in order to relax the social ambience during the conversations. Yet, I would always ask seriously for the interviewees’ oral consent for conducting interviews with me and using the data they offered. If the research topics seemed very banal and insensitive, such as in the cases of Chapters 3 and 5, most interviewees would simply respond: “use my words in whatever ways you like”. For the studies in Chapters 4 and 6 which were more sensitive and involved uneven structures of power, I tended to document the identities of my interviewees in more details. Thus formal consent form was taken seriously slightly more often, even though sometimes the interviewees would like to sign a nickname rather than the true name.

For the occasions in which I did use a formal consent form, the form (in Chinese and in English) is reproduced in the next pages.

## **Consent Form**

**Research Project title:** The social and cultural geographies of public space in post-reform Guangzhou, China

### **Researcher's contact details**

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### **Interviewee's details (If you are willing to provide)**

The case study concerned \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Place of interview \_\_\_\_\_

Time of interview \_\_\_\_\_

### **Dear interviewees and other informants**

My name is Junxi Qian and I am currently a PhD student in the School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh. My PhD research is interested in the everyday life of Guangzhou's public space. With this form I am cordially asking for your consent to be an interviewee in this research. I am also hoping that you would kindly lend me permission to use the materials from the interviews for writing up my PhD thesis.

This research is for academic purposes and serves no business interests. All the materials and data collected from the research will only be accessed by me (and my supervisors if necessary). I promise to do my utmost to respect the confidentiality of the interview data and your personal information as well. Please also note that this consent form is NOT a legal document subject to legal prescriptions of the People's Republic of China. It is concerned with the inter-personal agreement between you and me.

If you have any problem in the future with regard to the materials you have offered, please feel free to contact me with the details I listed at the top of this letter. It would be unfortunate,

but entirely legitimate, to withdraw your consent in the future. Also, if you are happy with me contacting you at a later date if there is some further information which I need, could you kindly leave a contact number? If you do not wish to be contacted again please let me know.

**Confirmation of consent (please give your signature)**

**Date:**

---- Chinese translation ----

## 訪談與研究同意書

**研究題目：**后改革時代廣州市城市公共空間的社會與文化地理學研究

### 研究者聯繫方式

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### 受訪者信息（如果您樂意提供則請填寫）

研究案例\_\_\_\_\_ 姓名\_\_\_\_\_ 性別\_\_\_\_\_ 年齡\_\_\_\_\_ 職業\_\_\_\_\_

訪談地點\_\_\_\_\_ 訪談時間\_\_\_\_\_

### 尊敬的受訪者鈞鑒

本人名叫錢俊希，目前是英國愛丁堡大學的博士研究生。我的博士論文研究將討論廣州市城市公共空間的社會與文化地理。我誠懇地邀請您作為一名訪談的受訪者，協助我的博士研究。同時我亦誠懇地請求您允許我使用您提供的素材與資料來進行博士論文的寫作。

本研究將完全用於學術研究之目的，不涉及任何商業用途。所有的訪談文本與素材只能由本人（或本人的論文指導教授）查閱，其他人士將無法閱覽。本人保證將尊重您提供的資料以及您的個人信息的隱秘性。同時，請求您簽署的此份文檔亦並非任何法律文件，非產生于中華人民共和國現行的任何法律條文，僅代表您與我本人之間在個人層面的協約關係。



如果您在未來對您提供的素材產生任何的不安與疑問，請您隨時通過這封信函上所列舉的聯繫方式和我取得聯絡。當然，您也可以隨時撤回您的許可。這雖然將對研究產生不利的影響，但完全在您的權力範圍以內。同時，如果未來您允許我就一些訪談中未有涉及到的信息進一步聯絡你，能否懇請您留下您的聯繫方式。如果您不願意本人在未來繼續聯繫你，麻煩您也同時告知我。

**同意確認（簽名）**

**日期**

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